

CIVIL RELIGION IN
MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Civil Religion in Modern Political Philosophy

Machiavelli to Tocqueville

EDITED BY STEVEN FRANKEL AND MARTIN D. YAFFE

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We dedicate this book to our teachers and students.

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Introduction

The study of politics and its relation to religion is hardly a novel endeavor, nor is the philosophical exploration of this theme an exclusively modern one. The ancient world is replete with such examinations, culminating in Plato's *Laws*, a dialogue devoted to demonstrating that "the political philosopher has the authority to interpret and guide divine law."¹ But while ancient examinations of divine law are characterized by an effort to understand religion as a serious, comprehensive, and authoritative challenge to political rationalism, modern evaluations of religion appear to have far less interest in revelation or its adherents. In Plato's *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger takes great pains to understand the divine law and the attachment of its adherents, particularly with respect to the role of reason in guiding human life. In contrast, modern scholars of political theory tend to dismiss religion out of hand. It is not uncommon for a contemporary scholar to announce at the beginning of his or her study: "This is a book written by someone with very little interest in religion as such. What deeply interests me is politics, and political philosophy."²

Perhaps we should not be surprised by such indifference or even hostility to the study of religion and its contribution to political life. There is significant precedent for it. The term "civil religion" was first employed by Jean Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (4.8). Rousseau concedes that

flourishing political life requires religious belief on the part of the citizens but adds that Christianity is ill suited to such a role. He instead envisions a simplified form of Christianity more closely tailored to political life: "The dogmas of civil religion ought to be few, simple, and exactly worded, without explanation or commentary. The existence of a mighty, intelligent, and beneficent Divinity, possessed of foresight and providence, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract and the laws: these are its positive dogmas. Its negative dogmas I confine to one, intolerance, which is a part of the cults we have rejected." Rousseau emphasizes the importance of a civil religion that culminates in toleration: "Whoever dares to say: 'Outside the Church is no salvation,' ought to be driven from the State." Yet the "dogmas" he lists are hardly original; indeed, they simply restate Baruch Spinoza's dogmas of civil religion for liberal democracy as presented in chapter 14 of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. Clearly Rousseau has inherited a view of civil religion that is already part of a tradition of political philosophy.

This tradition of civil religion contains several distinctive features, but perhaps the most startling is the remoteness of the justifications for it from anything resembling philosophical legitimacy. Spinoza, for example, insists that while these dogmas are salutary for political life, they can make no claim to any basis in fact or truth. He asserts instead that "each is bound to accommodate these dogmas of faith to suit his own grasp" (14.49). In other words, salutary religious beliefs are good for *others* (not philosophers or potential philosophers). Contemporary political philosophers have obeyed Spinoza's command to the extent of downplaying or neglecting the claims of religion altogether. As for why the pursuit of political philosophy obliges one to reject such claims, Spinoza says that "the goal of philosophy is nothing but truth, while that of faith . . . is nothing but obedience and piety" (14.54). Nor is Spinoza alone in holding this view. Thomas Hobbes, who claimed to be less audacious than Spinoza, goes further in arguing that religion is destroyed by philosophical reflection: "Therefore, when anything therein written is too hard for our examination, we are bidden to captivate our understanding to the words; and not to labour in sifting out a philosophical truth by logic of such mysteries as are not comprehensible, nor fall under any rule of natural science. For it is with the mysteries of our religion as with wholesome pills for the sick, which swallowed whole have the virtue to cure, but chewed, are for the most part cast up again without effect" (*Leviathan* 3.32). If religion

and philosophy occupy separate and exclusive domains, it is no wonder that contemporary students of politics disavow any interest in religion.

The similarities between Rousseau and Spinoza on religion conceal the following difference: Spinoza's dogmas are the culmination of fourteen chapters of extensive scriptural analysis, including prophecy, law, providence, and hermeneutics. Spinoza adopts the point of view of a believer in revelation and attempts to show on those grounds that revelation is consistent with democracy and freedom. His argument moves from theological or biblical premises toward political analysis. Rousseau's analysis proceeds in the opposite fashion. He first determines which beliefs are necessary for a republic and then presents such beliefs in a scriptural garb. In other words, the political argument determines his theological claims—that is, his “civil religion.”

Of course, it may well be the case that for Spinoza, too, the political teaching presupposes the theological teaching. In fact, Spinoza directs us obliquely to this very point of view. He writes, for example, at the beginning of the *Treatise*, that “many suppose as a foundation for understanding Scripture and extracting its true sense that it is everywhere truthful and divine. Namely, the very thing that ultimately has to be established from an understanding of it and by strict examination . . . they state at the very outset as a rule for its interpretation” (preface.4). The correct method, he implies, does not assume that the Bible is true or that we can simply accept its authority. Instead he argues that we need to reexamine the Bible to determine which parts are true. Most of the *Treatise*, the first fifteen chapters, is devoted to this reexamination. Spinoza concludes that the Bible's essential teaching is *caritas*—to love one's neighbor as oneself. Curiously, this conclusion is sharply at odds with his political teaching in chapters 16–20, which present the striving for power, *conatus*, as the fundamental political fact. The emphasis on *caritas* appears to be a salutary teaching determined by bleak political facts.

In this respect, Rousseau's presentation of the dogmas of his civil religion, as well as his more generally allowing political considerations to determine theological claims, is consistent with Spinoza's account. Not surprisingly, then, once the political argument is severed from the theological account, it is nearly impossible to take the theological argument seriously in its own right. Our volume, in contrast, is devoted to a study of the origins of civil religion in early modern philosophy, before the severance of politics

from religious life would or could be taken for granted—that is, when the theological and political dimensions of public life, and of the philosophical arguments concerning it, were still routinely connected to one another, however solidly or tenuously. We begin our study with Niccolò Machiavelli, the first of the early modern philosophers to suggest outspokenly that the tension between the goals of biblical piety and the goals of political life needs to be resolved in favor of the political. In the wake of Machiavelli's suggestion, and accommodating themselves to it, the subsequent thinkers in our volume each seek to recast and delimit traditional Christian teaching to serve and stabilize political life.

That is to say, in the theological dimensions of their various political-philosophical arguments, the thinkers in question each aim at remaking Christianity into what came to be called a civil religion, as our chapters will show. Machiavelli compares Christianity with the Roman religion it replaced historically and asks whether it is possible to revive something like the civic spiritedness endorsed by Roman religion on the basis of Christianity (Timothy Sean Quinn). Francis Bacon, in turn, cherry-picks Christian texts and doctrines to underwrite a civil religion that would encourage both scientific progress and the intellectual innovativeness required for it (Martin D. Yaffe). Hobbes seeks to discredit the Augustinian notion of the “city of God” as a community transcending the state, so as to reinterpret and hollow out Christianity's teaching about the human soul with a view to confining the soul within the total sovereignty of modern state authority (Mark Shiffman). And Spinoza, on the assumption that superstition is ineradicable from political life, insists on the complete rejection of miracles along with the consequences of such a rejection, including the belief in providence and transcendence, so as to replace older superstitions with newer ones, including the belief in progress (Steven Frankel). Other chapters focus on essential modern authors writing in the wake of the foregoing, including Rousseau (John Ray) and David Hume (Aaron Szymkowiak). These chapters present careful textual studies that show how the author in question forges an anti-Christian teaching on the basis of Scripture, pouring old wine into new bottles, in “spiritual warfare” meant (in Machiavelli's words) “to use the arms of one's enemy” to emancipate science and philosophy from ecclesiastical control and render religion subordinate to politics. For both saw subordinating religion to politics as the only alternative to subordinating politics to religion after the triumph of the Bible, and both championed

the reliance on human reason rather than divine authority. Consequently, these philosophers, too, were compelled to take issue with the theoretical as well as the practical claims of the Bible, including its teachings on miracles, creation *ex nihilo*, revelation, and a loving providential God.

Our volume culminates in the study of civil religion in America with chapters on John Locke, Charles de Montesquieu, the American founders, and Alexis de Tocqueville. The study of Locke exposes the profound tension between his political project and Christianity (Nasser Behnegar). As for Montesquieu, whom Madison famously describes in Federalist Paper 47 as “the oracle who is always consulted,” we have devoted two chapters of the book to explore his account of Christianity’s effect on civil religion in antiquity (Andrea Radasanu) and his particular influence on the American founding (Paul Carrese). An additional study on the founders’ approach to civil religion and the relation of church and state demonstrates the central importance of the question of civil religion to the American regime (Vincent Phillip Muñoz and Kevin Vance). The volume ends with Tocqueville’s account of civil religion and the American regime, which is seen to give rise to a new political science (Aaron L. Herold).

Differently stated, each of the chapters that follow may be said to contemplate the benefits and drawbacks of civil religion’s reordering of the relations between politics and religion with a view to pinpointing the ongoing issues at stake as they emerge in the writings of these early modern political philosophers.

Quinn’s chapter argues that Machiavelli considers the relationship between Christianity and civil society of paramount importance to the success of a regime, as is evident not only in the plan of his *Discourses on Livy* but in his progressively harsh treatment of Christianity, both explicit and covert, which spans all three books of the *Discourses*. At the same time, Machiavelli praises the ancient Roman civil religion for its power to cultivate spirited souls fit for ruling, or, as he remarks of Romulus, men “armed with virtue and with arms.” Yet Roman religion, as Machiavelli in fact acknowledges, was too weak to withstand Christianity, eventually succumbing to it. Thus Machiavelli is left with a problem, first confronted in his treatment of ecclesiastical principalities and its “unarmed prophets” in *The Prince*: how to revive a civil religion after the fashion of Roman religion on the basis of Christianity. Quinn explores this question by analyzing Machiavelli’s accounts of Roman religion and of Christianity in his *Discourses*, which

offers a more fulsome analysis, or at least a less covert analysis, of the issue of religion than does *The Prince*. After examining his introductory remarks about the relationship between Christianity and the “new modes and orders” he wishes to introduce, the chapter treats, in turn, Machiavelli’s discussion of Roman religion (book 1) and his explicit critique of Christianity (1.12, 2.2, and 3.1). The aim of Quinn’s analysis is twofold: to reveal the political problem Christianity poses, in Machiavelli’s view, and to indicate more generally his argument for the necessity of a civil religion that will cultivate future princes for future republics.

Yaffe shows how Bacon’s high-tech society of the future, whose contours he traces in his political-philosophical parable *New Atlantis*, evidently requires not only his prior refounding (*instauratio*) of philosophy or science so as to reorient it toward the practical goal of the “conquest of nature,” a refounding he sketches aphoristically in his *New Organon*, but also his co-opting of biblical theology so as to recast Christianity into a civil religion for that society, a recasting on display throughout the *New Atlantis*. Both books are seen to underwrite what Yaffe considers Baconian society’s putative, if theologically problematic, need for a biblically based civil religion that would encourage both scientific progress and the intellectual innovativeness required for it, though limited to its horizon.

Shiffman reminds readers how the “City of God,” as articulated by Augustine and developed and institutionalized through subsequent centuries, provides orientation and concrete community for a rich understanding of the human person and the fulfillment of human potential. In this Christian humanism, the fullness of the person, made possible through communion with a personal Creator, unfolds in several dimensions that acquire fundamental anthropological significance: humility, grace, conversion, vocation, sanctification, natural law, and conscience. As constitutive dimensions of human fulfillment, these aspects of humanity transcend the confines of earthly political authority, providing recognizable and communally acknowledged grounds for the inherent limitation of political authority. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes, seeking to discredit the City of God as a community transcending the state, reinterprets and evacuates each of these categories so as to reconquer the human soul and confine it within the total sovereignty of modern state authority.

As has already been mentioned, and as Frankel’s chapter spells out further, in preparing the reader for his argument in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

on behalf of liberal democracy, Spinoza presents a critique of biblical religion that culminates in a civil religion. This civil religion leaves ultimate sovereignty to the state in all matters of religious belief while presenting the general guidelines for acceptable theological views. For the most part, Spinoza's account emphasizes freedom and toleration, with one notable exception: his critique of miracles in chapter 6. Spinoza insists on the complete rejection of miracles along with the consequences of such a rejection, including the belief in providence and transcendence. Scholars have struggled to explain why Spinoza wishes to demolish the belief in miracles and, more generally, how his critique contributes to his overall political project. The purpose of Frankel's chapter is to explain Spinoza's critique of miracles in light of his political project. As Frankel shows, Spinoza hopes to replace older superstitions with newer ones, including the belief in progress.

Behnegar notes that the surprising power of resistance to liberal democracy in the Middle East has stimulated a renewed interest in reexamining the relationship between liberalism and religion. His chapter takes up the question of whether Locke's political philosophy is rooted in biblical premises or in this-worldly inferences of natural reason, a question that has played a large part in the impasse in Locke scholarship between the Straussian and Cambridge schools of interpretation. After disentangling this question from the polemical context of Leo Strauss's thesis, the study intervenes in this debate by examining the quotations from the Bible in the *Second Treatise*, interpreting the meaning of each passage in the original text and comparing it to the view that Locke claims it supports. Considerations of space limit Behnegar's focus to those quotations that are used by Locke primarily to address normative questions as opposed to historical-anthropological ones. His chapter sheds new light on many of these passages, while confirming Strauss's view that there is a profound tension between the general Christian position and Locke's political theory. Behnegar concludes with some reflections on Locke as a writer (modifying some of Strauss's comments in *Natural Right and History*) and on the significance of our study for contemporary liberalism as a living creed.

As Radasanu observes, Montesquieu may be known better for his departures from Machiavelli than for his debts to the Florentine master—though there are certainly some studies that focus on the latter as well. On the topic of religion and its role in political life, Montesquieu may seem to offer a complimentary account of Christianity's positive effects on politics. In

The Spirit of Laws, he praises Christianity's gentling effects on politics and international relations, particularly as compared to pagan Rome's rapacious expansionary war practices. He also, however, points to Christianity's large role in giving a bad name to commerce, a specifically modern turn on which progress in the establishment of gentle mores and limited government vitally depends. Indeed, Montesquieu's praise of Christianity turns out to be greatly qualified: not only is it at odds with modern commercial mores that prize this-worldly well-being, but it turns out to be of dubious usefulness to political life in general. Montesquieu, in a manner reminiscent of Machiavelli, privileges the political sphere and ultimately proposes that religion must give way to political exigencies. That Christianity fails to do this is a matter that Montesquieu takes up in various writings and in various (albeit sometimes quiet) ways. Radasanu's chapter focuses on Montesquieu's comparison of two Romes: the politically successful pagan one and the disastrous empire that allowed Christian concerns to undermine political ones. All three of Montesquieu's major political writings are considered—*Spirit of Laws*, *Persian Letters*, and *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*—but especially the last mentioned, which has Machiavelli's own *Discourses* as a starting point.

Carrese remarks on how Abraham Lincoln's American statesmanship echoes George Washington's "Farewell Address," the last of many such echoes in Washington's career of Montesquieu's argument that free government must shape the morals or manners of its citizenry, especially by harmonizing Christianity and good citizenship (*Spirit* 24). Not all of those echoes were drafted by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, nor is there evidence that Lincoln read Montesquieu. The point is that the spirit of moderation permeated American thought even if the source was not invoked. Among the most famous lines of Washington's Farewell Address are declarations that "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports"; that "A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity"; and that just policies are "recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human Nature." Nor can we suppose that "morality can be maintained without religion," for while "a refined education" might serve for exceptional minds, "reason and experience forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." A Montesquieuan spirit more obviously informs the sequel, that "virtue or morality is a necessary spring

of popular government.” It is a small step to Lincoln’s statement that only under God could America have a new birth of freedom from the horror of near self-destruction and to his invocation of humility and charity in the second inaugural address as a further call to rebirth. To the extent that such characteristically American harmonizing of the spirit of liberty and spirit of religion draws upon modern philosophy, Montesquieu is the indispensable if often unacknowledged influence.

As Szymkowiak points out, for Hume the civil role of religion is inseparable from its connection with the passions. Like many other British thinkers of his era, Hume warned against the dangers of “enthusiasm,” which he had come to associate with the varied sects arising in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Hume’s strategy for dealing with the largely chaotic politics of enthusiasm was, however, not entirely clear. It was articulated most fully and consistently not in his works on religion but in his *History of England*. In the third volume of that work, Hume enters a “digression concerning the ecclesiastical state,” in which he directly advocates the establishment of a state church. He argues that this would encourage a kind of torpor through material comfort, thwart “interested diligence” among the clergy, and foster moderation in the polity. Tensions in Hume’s “co-optation” strategy are evident from Adam Smith’s famous attack on it in section 5 of *The Wealth of Nations* and also from Hume’s own treatment of seventeenth-century independency in the fifth volume of the *History of England*. Smith argues that Hume has underestimated the extent to which religious imagination suffuses political action, and consequently that public competition among sects would better facilitate political moderation. In *History* 5, meanwhile, Hume complicates his own account by stressing the *positive* role of enthusiasm in generating civil liberty. It would appear that a statesman must respond to the historical predicament of his nation in advancing or neglecting establishment, yet *pace* Smith, there exists no clear historical-material arc of development by which he can judge the matter. Szymkowiak’s chapter traces the relative strengths of Hume’s position, especially against the nascent historicism of Smith. Still, what Szymkowiak will call Hume’s moral-historical “externalism” involves problems that can be obviated only by entertaining a possibility Hume refused—namely, that theological particulars might work as political causes.

According to Ray, Rousseau’s chapter in the *Social Contract* on civil religion, a term he was first to use, has been carefully scrutinized by scholars

of the first rank, including Ronald Beiner, Paul A. Rahe, and Hilail Gildin, all of whom have found it to suffer from serious logical inconsistencies. For Rousseau, only national religions that do not divide sovereignty can be civil religions, yet these are impossible in modernity. Although Rousseau insists that Christianity as a transnational or universal religion cannot be a civil religion, the dogmas he proposes in the final paragraphs of the chapter substantially overlap with the dogmas of Christianity, making it unclear how his dogmas escape the very criticism he levels at Christianity. By the time Rousseau published his chapter on civil religion in the *Social Contract*, the Enlightenment's attack on Christianity had achieved its primary intellectual task of biblical interpretation, with the result of greatly reducing, at least for intellectuals, the authority of clergy to declare, for the mass of common humanity, the meaning of sacred Scripture and the details of its dogmas. Rousseau thus entered the debate after great damage to the authority of the clergy to declare God's will had already been accomplished; he evidently did so with the objective of shoring up the most basic religious beliefs necessary to the support of law and morality while preserving the private sphere of belief from intolerance. The American example, in the writings of Tocqueville and of Lincoln, seems to demonstrate that Rousseau was wrong about the adaptability of Christianity to particular national cultures and thus its utility to the maintenance of freedom in democracy. Although perhaps wrong about Christianity's capacity to serve as a civil religion, Rousseau must be credited with the restoration in political philosophy of the positive benefits of religion to civil society.

As Muñoz and Vance recall, in the landmark "wall of separation" church-state case *Everson v. Board of Education* in 1947, the Supreme Court turned to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison to announce the meaning of the establishment clause. Ever since, scholars and judges have appealed to the American founders to interpret the First Amendment's protection of religious freedom. A broadly shared methodological commitment to originalism in church-state matters, however, has not produced much agreement on the bench. An underappreciated reason why is that while the founders agreed about the existence and importance of a natural right to religious freedom, they disagreed over how to separate church from state. The aim of Muñoz and Vance's chapter is to explain the founders' shared and competing understandings of religious freedom. They begin by explaining the founders' common understanding of the existence of a natural right to religious liberty.

They then consider the founders' disagreement over how that right ought to limit the scope and exercise of governmental power. By better understanding how and why the founders agreed and disagreed about religious liberty, they suggest, Americans today might more accurately and thoughtfully deliberate about how best to protect our "first freedom."

Finally, noting how recent scholarship has illuminated the way that the political philosophers of the Enlightenment sought to transform Christianity to support the requirements of modern democratic politics, Herold's chapter examines Tocqueville's critical reflections on that project of religious transformation, as well as his attempt to contribute to it while also moderating it and correcting what he saw as its crucial deficiencies. Unlike that of his Enlightenment predecessors, the religious outlook of Tocqueville's time was decisively affected by modern philosophy. In America, Tocqueville observed the theologies of thinkers like Locke ascendant and virtually unopposed, with the result that souls were largely alienated from the biblical beliefs and sentiments that the Enlightenment had sought to dampen. Tocqueville, however, perceives an unforeseen danger in this alienation: Americans as he describes them are affected, in ways they hardly have the vocabulary to describe, by the loss of certain distinctly human experiences and concerns, including a devotion to community, to an entity greater than oneself, and—connected to these—a desire for an eternal and perfect existence. At the same time, however, Tocqueville regards democracy, in spite of its tendency to hide these experiences from us, as fundamentally just. Tocqueville's political science therefore faces a complex challenge. On the one hand, how can he craft a civil religion for a people that has been decisively shaped by modern rationalism, and among whom religion is consequently on the decline? And on the other, in recovering a sense of what the Enlightenment rebelled against, how can Tocqueville preserve and protect those core aspects of liberal and democratic politics that he regards as fundamentally just and integral to human flourishing—aspects whose absence from the biblical tradition in fact helped motivate the Enlightenment's hostility to it? Tocqueville's attempt to balance or reconcile these twin concerns, Herold argues, forms the centerpiece of his political science. Thus understanding this attempt helps us understand not only his relationship to prior thinkers but also his complicated view of democracy's justice.

Our volume will appeal to scholars in the history of political philosophy, political theory, and American political thought. The analyses in it will be

of particular interest to students who wish to understand the relation of modern political theory to the American founding. Last but not least, the volume's overall approach—the careful study of original texts—is meant to let readers move quickly to the theoretical heart of the role and meaning of civil religion in modern liberalism.

NOTES

1. See Mark Lutz, *Divine Law and Political Philosophy in Plato's Laws* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012), 3.

2. Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

CHAPTER 1

Machiavelli, Christianity, and Civil Religion

TIMOTHY SEAN QUINN

Although the idea of civil religion is of ancient provenance, its modern articulation begins with Niccolò Machiavelli and emerges from a sustained critique of Christianity.¹ This critique is notorious for its severity. In both *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli subjects Christianity to progressively harsh treatment, both explicit and covert, accusing it in turn of weakening martial resolve, undermining political unity, and cultivating an “ambitious idleness” conducive to exploitation by tyrants, and inimical to a spirited defense of republican freedoms. At the same time, elements of his moral and political teaching—for example, his celebrated endorsements of murder and mendacity—seem so at odds with the teaching of the gospel that Machiavelli emerges, in the words of Leo Strauss, as a “teacher of evil.”² In contrast to his overt and covert treatments of Christian virtues, Machiavelli praises the ancient Roman civil religion for its power to cultivate spirited souls fit for ruling, or, as he remarks of Romulus, men “armed with virtue and with arms.” Rome, in short, was an example of “religion used well.”³ Yet there is a serious problem with these verdicts, for, as Machiavelli in fact acknowledges, ancient Roman religion was too weak to withstand Christianity and eventually succumbed to it. However successful Roman religion may have been arming citizens with virtue and with arms, its binding power on Roman civil society could not resist corrosion by the acid of Christian

teaching. Yet Machiavelli acknowledges the necessity for religion to serve a vital role in civil society. He is therefore left with a problem, first confronted in his treatment of ecclesiastical principalities and its “unarmed prophets” in *The Prince*: how to revive a civil religion after the fashion of ancient Roman religion in light of Christianity’s evident success, and therefore in some manner on the basis of Christianity itself.

This question of Machiavelli’s relationship to Christianity has been well trod by Machiavelli scholars. It is useful, at the outset, to visit the main lines of interpretation, which are roughly two. In the first camp are those who attempt to see Machiavelli as attempting to preserve Christianity by refashioning it in a way that will avoid its current state of official corruption. This camp tends to understand Machiavelli as maintaining some vestige of personal piety: that his complaint is not against Christianity but against clerical abuses that have deformed it. Especially representative of this camp is Sebastian de Grazia, for whom Machiavelli is less an enemy of Christianity than a reformer. In de Grazia’s view, the reforms that Machiavelli wishes, guided by the rituals of Roman paganism, which Machiavelli praises for their power to inspire manliness through sanguinary displays, nonetheless remain within the pale of traditional Christian moral teaching.⁴ While de Grazia is correct in seeing Machiavelli’s calls for reform of Christianity as inspired by the example of Roman civil religion, his argument is perhaps too sanguine about the threats to Christian morality posed by this example. Nor can it easily embrace those instances where Machiavelli’s explicit teaching is stridently at odds with traditional moral teaching, as, for example, when he recommends murdering the sons of Brutus as an inevitable measure for stabilizing a recently conquered territory. Thus a second camp: those unwilling to grant Machiavelli a share of traditional piety, and who subsequently understand his political teaching to be utterly inimical to Christianity. In addition to Strauss, Vickie Sullivan is a persuasive contemporary representative of this view.⁵ Sullivan wishes to argue that even though Machiavelli presents his critique of Christianity as a reinterpretation of Christian practice, it is a reinterpretation that, if endorsed, destroys the basic tenets of Christianity. Sullivan’s view has the advantage of dealing successfully with those passages in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* where Machiavelli’s moral teaching is decidedly at odds with the gospel.

In what follows, I will agree with the main lines of Sullivan’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s intentions, while attempting to explain how he uses

Christianity as the basis of a new civil religion. This point is crucial if we are to understand the consequent attacks on religion in the unfolding of liberalism. In particular the critiques of Christianity, and of religion in general, in Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (to whom we owe the term “civil religion”) all look back to antecedent origins in Machiavelli.⁶ The aim of the present essay is to explore this question by analyzing Machiavelli’s accounts of Roman religion and of Christianity in his *Discourses*, which contains his most explicit treatment of the issue of civil religion. After examining his introductory remarks about the relationship between Christianity and the “new modes and orders” he wishes to introduce, the essay will treat, in turn, Machiavelli’s discussion of Roman religion in book 1 and his explicit critique of Christianity in 1.12, 2.2, and 3.1. The aim of the analysis is twofold: to reveal the political problem Christianity poses, in Machiavelli’s view, and to indicate more generally his argument for the necessity and the basic contours of a civil religion that will cultivate future princes for future republics.

That Machiavelli considers the relationship between Christianity and civil society to be of paramount significance is evident, first, upon consideration of the plan of the *Discourses*. While the title of Machiavelli’s work promises to explain only the first ten books of Livy’s *History of Rome*, the number of chapters in the *Discourses* corresponds to the number of chapters in the whole of Livy’s history. In this manner, Machiavelli insinuates his intention to address not only the first ten books of Livy, which narrate the rise of republican Rome up to the Second Punic War, but the entire history of the Roman republic, up to the moment of its collapse. That collapse corresponds with the rise of Christianity. The implied conclusion is clear enough: Christianity posed the true threat to the Roman republic. The preface to book 1 of the *Discourses* inaugurates the entire book with this verdict. There, Machiavelli presents the reader with an apparent oxymoron: seeking “new modes and orders” by way of a path “as yet untrod by anyone,” he turns for guidance to ancient kingdoms and republics, which are nowadays “rather admired than imitated.” He laments the eclipse of ancient virtue and the absence of “the examples of the ancients” informing contemporary military and political judgment. In stating this, Machiavelli invites a question as to why ancient examples and ancient virtue not only fail to inspire but have fallen into oblivion. He responds that this circumstance has arisen “not so much from the weakness into which the present religion has led the

world, or from the evil that an ambitious idleness has done to many Christian provinces and cities, as from not having a true knowledge of histories, through not getting from reading them that sense nor tasting that flavor that they have in themselves.” We note three features of this passage. First, Machiavelli has stated that Christianity is guilty of eclipsing ancient virtue by cultivating “weakness” and “ambitious idleness”—a verdict he explicitly clarifies later, in 2.2, when he accuses Christianity of effeminacy. Second, Christianity is broadly responsible for the oblivion into which antiquity has fallen. It has intervened between the ancients and us in ways that have made it impossible to learn from antiquity: owing to Christianity, we have simply lost our taste for it. Finally, we learn something in this passage about Machiavelli’s rhetoric: he insinuates his judgment about Christianity while arguing that Christianity is not *entirely* the source of the modern oblivion of the ancient.⁷ Whatever else may have encouraged that oblivion Machiavelli neglects to mention.

The suggestions implicit in the plan of the *Discourses* (that Christianity is inimical to republicanism) and in the preface to book 1 (that Christianity destroys our sense for ancient virtue) form a unified teaching about Christianity at the outset of the *Discourses*: the oblivion into which political life has sunk as a result of Christianity makes ancient modes and orders seem new. Machiavelli thereby implies that his effort in the *Discourses* is less a matter of invention than of rediscovery and rebirth, a project in keeping with the spirit of the Renaissance—that is, in keeping with prevailing opinion. Yet this conclusion is incomplete at best, since Machiavelli also states that he has embarked upon a path “as yet untrod by anyone”: the ancient virtue he claims to rescue from oblivion may have only anti-Christianity, or at least lack of influence by Christianity, in common with the actual virtue sought by classical antiquity, as articulated, for example, in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Yet as we should recall from chapter 15 of *The Prince*, “ancient”—that is, Platonic—notions of the good, and therewith of the concept of virtue developed by Plato and Aristotle, are but works of the imagination. This judgment informs the ensuing chapters of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli makes explicit his redefinition of classical virtue.⁸ It is especially important to note this moment in Machiavelli’s thought, since the prevailing Christian conception of virtue, Thomistic in inspiration, has classical notions of virtue as its basis. In this respect, Machiavelli’s “ancient virtue” is possibly but one sort of ancient virtue, a thought to which Machiavelli alerts us by his

championing, here and elsewhere, of Sparta over Athens—that is, of military prowess over wisdom and the arts.⁹ Or it is no sort of ancient virtue at all but something entirely new, in which case his appeal to ancient virtue is an appeal to prevailing opinion: knowing his readers would “rather admire than imitate” the ancients, he can use their admiration to silence Christianity’s deleterious effect on political life without making an unqualified appeal to the ancients.¹⁰ In that event, new modes and orders can be introduced without interference from either ancient or Christian precedents. Machiavelli therefore inaugurates the *Discourses* by linking together the fates of ancient and Christian virtue, while simultaneously suggesting that Christianity has supplanted the ancient and is therewith the principal impediment to his own introduction of “new modes and orders.”

Machiavelli’s explicit critique of Christianity in the *Discourses* now follows in three places: 1.12, 2.2, and 3.1. The first instance arises in the context of five chapters in book 1 (chapters 11–15) dealing with Roman religion. It is necessary to consider the main features of this account, since it serves as a foil for his subsequent critique of Christianity. Roman religion, Machiavelli states, was an invention of Numa Pompilius, intended to tame the ferocity Romulus provoked in the Roman people and to “reduce” them to “civil obedience” by encouraging fear of God. This fear affected the people so profoundly that, Machiavelli writes, “citizens feared to break an oath much more than the laws.” Roman religion was born from political necessity. It inclined the people to civic virtue and patriotism; it “served to command armies, to animate the plebs, to keep men good, to bring shame to the wicked” (1.11). Roman religion was such a successful innovation that Machiavelli concludes that it is to Numa, rather than Romulus, that Rome is more obligated. This judgment is a curious one that, in fact, Machiavelli will later temper; while Numa, lacking Romulus’s military prowess, will hold the state “or not hold it as the times or fortune turn under him,” Romulus, “armed with prudence and with arms, will hold it in every mode” (*Discourses* 1.19; cf. Livy, *History* 1.22–35). This equivocation concerning Numa’s status among Rome’s founders is indicative of the problem at the core of Roman religion: it must tame the ferocity of citizens without destroying it. In this respect, though, Roman religion appears to have been successful. As Machiavelli puts the matter, “Where there is religion, arms can easily be introduced, and where there are arms and no religion, the latter can be introduced only with difficulty” (1.11).¹¹ It is noteworthy that Machiavelli writes “religion,” rather

than specifying the Roman religion; as Machiavelli explains in *The Prince* and, later, in the *Discourses*, the Christian gospel is not notorious for feats of arms.¹² What is it about religion, then, that permits the introduction of arms into a regime otherwise irenic? As Machiavelli immediately notes, Romulus did not have, nor did he need, recourse to religion: “To make other civil and military orders, the authority of God was not necessary.” For Numa, however, divine authority was necessary, “because he wished to put new and unaccustomed orders in the city.” The accent here falls on the phrase “new and unaccustomed orders”; religion makes the new seem old. This judgment is familiar from *The Prince*, where Machiavelli explains that the authority enjoyed by “ecclesiastical principalities” is “sustained by orders that have grown old with religion.” Machiavelli continues: these orders “have been so powerful and of such a kind that they keep their princes in the state however they proceed and live.” Consequently, ecclesiastical princes—cardinals and popes, presumably—“have states, and do not defend them; they have subjects, but do not govern them” (1.11). Religion is sustained by custom, and custom is more potent than most princes.¹³ Later in book 1 of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli repeats this judgment: whoever seeks “to suppress an ancient way of life in a city and turn it to a new and free way of life . . . should contrive that those alterations retain as much of the ancient as possible” (1.25). Religion, in short, encourages acceptance of the new by casting it in the guise of the old; where there is religion, arms can therefore be introduced. While Romulus could depend upon the authority his ferocity bequeathed him, Numa, lacking Romulus’s arms, armed himself with God.

In this way, Roman religion solves a second and crucial political problem: fostered by the power of custom, it preserves the continuity of the city’s orders, absent another Romulus. Since “kingdoms that depend solely on the virtue of one are hardly durable,” it is necessary “to have not one prince who governs prudently while he lives, but one individual who orders it so that it is also maintained when he dies” (1.11). As Machiavelli makes plain later in book 1, great political dangers arise when a weak prince follows a strong one; issues of succession are among the most intractable. It therefore becomes necessary for republics to find a mode of education in order to ensure “infinite most virtuous princes who are successors to one another” (1.20). Religion is, as Machiavelli will state explicitly in book 2, the principal source of moral-political formation. In the argument of the *Discourses*, Numa’s genius consisted in discovering the power of religion to preserve

regimes; a prince must appear as terrible as God, and God as terrible as a prince.

At this juncture, Machiavelli draws a summary judgment from his first look at Roman religion: that “there never was any orderer of extraordinary laws for a people who did not have recourse to God, because otherwise they would not be accepted” (1.11). “Prudent” and “wise” men understand that certain political goods lack self-evident reasons and so require “recourse to God” in order to be persuasive. Roman religion is a “noble lie”; its authority and persuasive power stem from the fiction that God ordains the orders of the city. Numa therefore claims to have slept with a nymph who then offered him political counsel (Livy, *History* 1.8). Likewise, Savonarola, Machiavelli notes, successfully persuaded the Florentines that he spoke with God. Savonarola, however, was an “unarmed prophet,” as Machiavelli famously observes in *The Prince*; once the people ceased to believe in his divine authority, they turned against him (6).¹⁴ The outrageousness, along with the success, of Numa’s mendacity indicates the superstitiousness of most people; “those times,” Machiavelli writes, “were full of religion and the men . . . were crude” (*Discourses* 1.11).¹⁵ Machiavelli makes plain that religion motivates only the unsophisticated; in our age, he states, it would be easier to cultivate it among “mountain men” than in “city folk.” Speaking later of the attempt by the Roman nobility to weaken the tribunes of the plebs, Machiavelli relates that the opportunities created by “plague and famine” allowed the nobles “to say that the gods were angry,” and thus influence the next set of elections in their own favor (1.13). As Machiavelli puts it, they are an example of religion “used well.”

But for religion to be used well it must be believed. There is, therefore, “no greater indication of the ruin of a province than to see the divine cult disdained” (1.12). To preserve it, Machiavelli indicates that “above everything else” it is necessary “to maintain the ceremonies of the religion uncorrupt”—that is, to know the “foundations” of “the religion where a man is born.”¹⁶ In the case of Roman “Gentile” religion, this means preserving faith in the auguries. Two chapters later, Machiavelli offers us a pair of cautionary tales in support of this verdict (1.14). Papirius, confronting an important battle with the Samnites, ordered his *pullari*, “chicken-men,” to read the auspices. Their chickens would not eat; some of the *pullari* leaked this news to the soldiers, who began to shy away from the idea of battle. Learning this, and knowing that the battle needed to be waged, Papirius ordered the *pullari* in

the front rank of the troops. He thereby accomplished two things: he steeled his men to victory, preceded as they were into battle by divine men, and he murdered all the chicken-men. By contrast, Appius Pulcher, faced with the same situation in the First Punic War, declared that if the chickens had not eaten, "Let's see if they wish to drink," and had them all drowned. At this sight, his men lost heart; Appius was henceforth rebuked for breaking faith.¹⁷

It is important to note that Machiavelli stipulates that the *ceremonies* of "the religion where a man is born" be maintained. In so stating, he suggests indifference to matters of belief or doctrine; Roman religion does not appeal to the intellect. Rather, its authority stems from the fact that it is one's own and that its origins are believed to be divine. It is therefore especially suitable for cultivating political unity among the "vulgar": even without belief, ceremonial practice binds citizens to the community and its fundamental customs and convictions. To maintain these convictions is critical, since law alone is insufficient to inure a regime against corruption. Machiavelli therefore argues, "As good customs have need of laws to maintain themselves, so laws have need of good customs so as to be observed" (1.18). The legal bonds of religious observance are all the more critical the less belief in them is likely; as mentioned earlier, the nobles knew how to use religion well precisely because they were too sophisticated to believe it. Supporting this judgment is Machiavelli's conviction regarding human nature: since "the generality of men feed on what appears as much as on what is," custom enjoys great power over human affairs, especially as those affairs are subject to fortune and variability (1.25).¹⁸ It is therefore necessary always to retain "at least the shadow" of ancient modes, especially when introducing new legislation into the city, or when seeking to reform it. Religion so conceived is the preserve of and, as seen earlier, preserves custom. Where the religion successfully keeps up the appearance of the ancient convictions and customs of a regime, the regime will maintain itself and its laws. In the case of Roman religion, the precise ceremonies that Machiavelli has in mind, which served to sustain Roman customs and therewith Roman law, are sacrifices (2.2). "Full of blood and ferocity," they appeal to the very passions that must be maintained if a republic and its virtue are to thrive.¹⁹ The ceremonies of the Roman religion inculcate in its citizens a love of country through habituation to those very spectacles that will prepare them for the sanguinary excesses of war. However mendacious Roman religion, it remains noble.

These convictions regarding the pagan version of civil religion form the basis for Machiavelli's critique of Christianity. Comparing the "Roman Church" to Roman pagan religion in 1.12, he observes that "if such religion"—that is, one in whose miracles men believed—"had been maintained by the princes of the Christian republic as was ordered by its giver, the Christian states and republics would be more united, much happier than they are." The Roman Church, having failed to maintain "opinion and credulity," has therefore become toxic. The reason lies with the corruption that lies with the head: Machiavelli observes, ironically, that "those peoples who are closest to the Roman Church, the head of our religion, have less religion." Having less religion, in turn, Christian regimes cannot profit from the political advantages Christianity affords them. Consequently, "whoever might consider [the Roman Church's] foundations and see how much they differ from them might judge . . . that either its ruin or its scourging is near." The Roman Church, owing to its corruption, is on the verge of self-destruction. Machiavelli cites "two very powerful reasons" in support of this judgment: the "wicked example" of the papal court and the disunity the church has fostered in Italy. In the first case, he notes that the Roman province "has lost all devotion and all religion"; the salutary moral and political effects of religion fail if no one believes it. In the second case, the loss of religion has brought with it a deleterious political effect of its own: it has kept Italy divided. "The cause," Machiavelli writes, "that Italy is not in the same condition and does not also have one republic or one prince to govern it is solely the church." Too weak "to seize the tyranny of Italy," yet strong enough to summon the foreign powers France and Switzerland to its aid, the church has been impotent to unite Italy while preventing anyone else from doing so.²⁰ These "two very powerful reasons" against the Roman Church are related: Machiavelli links the church's impotence to its attempt at "temporal empire," which fails owing to its inability to marshal support from the peoples who have lost faith. Only foreign powers, far from the corruption at the head, are willing to come to the church's defense. Hence, Machiavelli's verdict at the close of 1.12: where Roman civil religion united, the Roman Catholic Church has divided.²¹

The looming threat of the church's destruction owing to its endemic corruption is a powerful indictment indeed. But one must keep in mind that Machiavelli is here only criticizing the Roman Catholic Church in its temporal dimension—a criticism not unfamiliar to readers of Marsilius

of Padua or of Dante.²² Nor has Machiavelli indicated the nature or the cause of papal corruption. His criticism of the Roman Church is not, in these respects, a criticism of Christianity. Instead, he has suggested that comparison of the present condition of the church to its “foundations” shows those foundations to be free from corruption, a point to which he will return in 3.1. In spite of the vehemence of his criticism of the papacy’s forays into temporal politics, in short, Machiavelli writes with comparative restraint regarding what we might call the “essence of Christianity.” However, in 2.2, Machiavelli seems to suggest a problem endemic not merely to the administration of the church but to Christianity itself, one sign of which is Machiavelli’s substitution of the phrase “our religion” for “Roman Church.”

Machiavelli prepares for this new criticism in the preface to book 2 by recalling his readers to the theme of the preface of book 1: praise of antiquity. Here, he considers such praise, in the main, unreasonable, since “the truth of ancient things is not altogether understood,” and men see only the glories of antiquity and none of its infamies, and since it is past, and therefore no longer able to provoke either fear or envy. However, there are occasions when praise of antiquity is warranted: specifically, when a regime is descending into a state of corruption, having lost its “political way of life.” In that event, praise of the ancient is fitting as a foil for the corruption of the present age. In stating this, Machiavelli invites comparison to his own procedure—praising the ancient on behalf of new modes and orders—and the causes that necessitate that procedure—“the weakness into which the present religion has led the world.” The present age suffers, in short, from a decline of virtue; this decline, as Machiavelli has noted, parallels the rise of Christianity. In 2.2, Machiavelli takes up this theme. The title of this chapter concerns “what peoples the Romans had to combat, and that they obstinately defended their freedom.” That is to say, the theme is defense of the common good.²³ In this respect, Machiavelli observes that love of freedom was greater in Roman antiquity than now. The difference is due to those religions that have educated us. While “our religion” makes us esteem less “the honor of the world,” Roman religion held it in high esteem. As a result, Roman citizens were “more ferocious in their actions” than we are. Machiavelli links their strength to their ceremonies, “the magnificence of their sacrifices,” “full of blood and ferocity . . . with a multitude of animals being killed there.” Roman religion habituated its practitioners to the virtue necessary for impassioned defense of the republic. By contrast, our ceremonies

are humble, “more delicate than magnificent,” containing “no ferocious and vigorous action.” From this contrast Machiavelli concludes:

Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative men more than active men. It has them place the highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human. . . . And if our religion asks that you have strength in yourself, it wishes you to be capable more of suffering than of doing something strong. This mode of life thus seems to have rendered the world weak and given it in prey to criminal men, who can manage it securely, seeing that the collectivity of men, so as to go to paradise, think more of enduring their beatings than of avenging them.

In some respects, this passage shows us a familiar caricature of Christianity, repeated throughout the Enlightenment: living for the next life, Christianity ignores this life. At the same time, it is safe to say that the Sermon on the Mount offers little to counsel to the warrior, other than to lay down his arms. It is important though not to acquiesce too readily to this judgment. For one could well argue that in living for the next life, men may indeed be more willing to sacrifice their lives, as examples of Christian martyrdom reveal. The alternative position, that Roman religion encourages daring because it is oriented wholly toward the honor of this world, is not therefore self-evident: too great a concern for this world could render men cowards. The central accusation, however, concerns weakness, rather than cowardice. Christianity makes men weak by encouraging the wrong sort of strength; it privileges suffering over action. Christian weakness is therefore inseparable from contemplation or “idleness.” In that event, Christianity is apolitical, not conducive to “a political way of life”—that is, to republicanism. But even in its apolitical condition it is not without political effect. Its proclivity to foster weakness and idleness, its orientation away from this world, encourages tyranny by making men servile. Consequently, Machiavelli observes that “not as many republics are seen in the world as were seen in antiquity; nor, as a consequence, is as much love of freedom seen in peoples as was then.” Christianity stands accused as an enemy of freedom. Returning to the title of 2.2, Machiavelli simultaneously implies that Christians would not only be unable to defend their freedom; they would also count among those “peoples the Romans had to combat,” presumably owing to their contagious idleness.

Machiavelli, however, still blunts his criticism of Christianity as he did earlier, in 1.12. Even though “the world appears to be made effeminate and heaven disarmed,” this failure “arises without doubt more from the cowardice of the men who have interpreted our religion according to idleness and not according to virtue” (2.2). In fact, Machiavelli argues, Christianity, rightly understood, encourages patriotism and defense of one’s country. It is only “these educations and false interpretations” that teach otherwise. Machiavelli does not name those responsible for these false interpretations according to cowardice and idleness, nor for the sources of a Christian-inspired patriotism. Among the former we may count popes and prelates—that is, those benefited by holding a people in subjection. Savonarola, the “unarmed prophet,” is a candidate for the latter, as well as for a sort of Christian political savagery, to which we will return later.²⁴ In his final explicit criticism of Christianity, in 3.1, however, Machiavelli indicates what amounts to a partial remedy for these “false interpretations”: the “renewal” in “our religion.”

The explicit theme of 3.1 concerns the need periodically to draw both “sects” and “republics” back to their origins to ensure their longevity. Thus “our religion . . . would be altogether eliminated,” had it not been for the success of Franciscan and Dominican renewals that have drawn it back to its origins. By means of “poverty and . . . the example of Christ,” they have restored to men’s minds what had been “eliminated” from them. What had been eliminated, according to 1.12, was obedience to papal authority, as a result of the perceived corruption of church prelates. By contrast, these new orders, Franciscan and Dominican, held so much credit with the majority of people that they were able to sway them back to obedience. Machiavelli writes:

Their new orders were so powerful that they are the cause that the dishonesty of the prelates and of the heads of the religion do not ruin it. Living still in poverty and having so much credit with peoples in confessions and sermons, they give them to understand that it is evil to speak evil of evil, and that it is good to live under obedience to them and, if they make an error, to leave them to God to punish. So they do the worst they can because they do not fear the punishment they do not see and do not believe. This renewal, therefore, has maintained and maintains this religion. (3.1)

This striking verdict on the power of Franciscan and Dominican renewals is not original to Machiavelli; it has a precedent in Dante, *Paradiso*, cantos 11 and 12.²⁵ Nonetheless, it possesses some notable features. First, we note that Machiavelli now refers to “our religion” as a sect. In so doing, he implies that it resembles every other sect—that is, it has no special claim to divine authority. Second, we note Machiavelli’s implicit approval of an “original” Christianity to which Franciscans and Dominicans have restored the church. This approval is in keeping with the judgment in 2.2 implicitly exempting Christianity from the errors of its interpreters; as he previously stated in 1.12, the “foundations” of Christianity differ from its current “interpretation.” Machiavelli’s verdict on Christianity here, in short, is mixed, in spite of the harshness of his rhetoric. Owing to Franciscan and Dominican renewals it has regained the power it had previously lost owing to the corruption at the head. Here, the prelature is no less corrupt, but it has been able to manipulate the people into accepting its authority—crucial, since, as he argued in book 1 concerning Roman religion, a superstition must be believed to be effective. In this event, the renewed prelature must not suffer from the same weakness it presumably encourages in others.

By the conclusion of 3.1, Machiavelli’s summary verdict concerning Christianity is a highly qualified one. On the one hand, Christianity is guilty of falling into a corruption that undermines its authority, the political effect of which is division and disunity in Italy. Christianity is therefore guilty of weakness, which it promotes through the effeminacy of its observances. Consequently, by encouraging weakness, it promotes tyranny; it rejects, in effect, the relevance of the difference between freedom and tyranny, by fostering indifference to worldly goods. On the other hand, at least one of these failures—the promotion of weakness—is not of the essence of Christianity, as Franciscan and Dominican renewals demonstrate. Overturning the “educations and false interpretations” that have encouraged Christian meekness, these renewals restore to the hierarchy the power to manipulate Christian subjects and hold them in sway. Christian meekness is but a mask for the sort of power that Machiavelli approves in Roman religion.

The most significant power Machiavelli ascribes to Christianity is the power to foster oblivion—a theme he introduced in the preface to book 1. In 2.5 and 2.8 he explicitly returns to this theme. In the first case, Machiavelli argues that, assuming the Aristotelian doctrine that the world is eternal, the memory of the human race should surpass five thousand years.²⁶ That

it does not must be due either to human or to divine causes. In the first case, the emergence of “new sects”—that is, a new religion—invariably extinguishes old beliefs. Machiavelli cites in support of this judgment the Christian suppression of Gentile religion, which “eliminated every memory of that ancient theology.” Under Pope Gregory and others, the Christian religion “persecuted all the ancient memories, burning the works of the poets and historians, ruining images, and spoiling every other thing that might convey some sign of antiquity.”²⁷ Machiavelli’s allusion to persecutions of Gentiles by Christians is deliberately and doubly ironic. First, it draws attention to Rome’s failure to eradicate Christianity, a failure that contrasts with Rome’s success in erasing all memory of the Etruscans (2.4). If Christians indeed count among those “peoples the Romans had to combat,” it is safe to say the Romans lost the battle rather impressively. Equally important, the allusion displays Christianity’s own success at eliminating its enemies, a feat that contrasts with its irenic teaching and that it accomplished, at least at first, without arms. This example helps clarify Machiavelli’s earlier statement, that an “original” version of Christianity, free from corruption by later interpreters, could foster patriotism and defense of one’s own: at its core, Christianity can be ruthless with its precursors.²⁸ Again, the contrast with Roman religion is striking: what Rome failed to accomplish “armed with prudence and with arms,” Christianity successfully achieved armed only with doctrine. In so suggesting, Machiavelli invites us to reconsider the role of religious doctrine—as opposed to religious *practice*—in political life, given its power to send the ancient orders into oblivion. We discover here, in short, a confirmation of the thesis in the preface to book 1 that the oblivion of things ancient wrought by Christianity is the principal cause of Machiavelli’s call for “new modes and orders.”

In 2.8, Machiavelli expands upon the theme of Christianity’s power to cause oblivion, in this instance through territorial expansion. His explicit theme is how famine, war, or oppression compels a people to abandon their ancestral lands and “inundate the country of others.” Two principal illustrations of this thesis are the Goths’ destruction of the Roman Empire and the Hebrews’ invasion of Syria. “Constrained to seek new lands,” Machiavelli writes, both Hebrews and Goths entered violently into other lands, murdered the inhabitants, and stole their possessions, establishing a new kingdom and renaming cities and regions. Machiavelli mentions in this connection the example of the Maurusians, who, fleeing before the oncoming

Hebrews, “judged they could not resist them” and fled to Africa. According to Procopius, whom Machiavelli quotes in Latin translation, the Maurusians then inscribed the following message on stelae: “We are Maurusians, who fled before the face of Joshua the robber, son of Nun.” In Latin, the names Joshua and Jesus are identical: Iesu.²⁹ Machiavelli’s point, while covert, is clear: just as the Hebrews “inundated” Syria and the Goths Italy, the Christians were once an irresistible flood, wiping away the very memory of old modes and orders.

These passages suggest an alternative way of understanding Christianity to the one offered in *The Prince*, where Christian prelates “have states, and do not defend them.” By the end of his analysis of Christianity in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli offers the striking spectacle of a Christianity that resembles to a high degree the very Roman civil religion it succeeded in supplanting. In Machiavelli’s view, an “original” Christianity, freed from the encrustations of theologians, displays a power that Roman civil religion and Roman arms failed to withstand. In a similar vein, Machiavelli offers his readers a covert warning about the fate of Christianity as it has drifted away from its origins into corruption and a failure to arouse belief. Christianity emerges, in short, at once weak and potent, mild and violent, pious and cynically skeptical. Its tendency to extremes would seem to indicate the political failure of Christianity, either overshooting or undershooting the mark of expediency. How then are we, in the final analysis, to understand Machiavelli’s teaching?

As Machiavelli’s account of pagan Roman religion makes plain, “religion used well” is necessary for the success of regimes. But a return to the civil religion of Roman antiquity, however desirable, is impossible, given its suppression by Christianity. If then a civil religion remains politically expedient, it can only be revived on the basis of Christianity—that is, on the basis of the prevailing opinion about religion. In fact, it is the very oblivion into which Christianity forced Roman religion that encourages Machiavelli to seek, so to speak, a muscular Christianity, armed with doctrine and with arms, capable of acting ruthlessly against its perceived opponents, as the examples of “Ferdinand the Catholic” and the martial papacies to which Machiavelli alludes often in *The Prince* make abundantly clear.³⁰ In this respect, the “original,” potent Christianity Machiavelli claims to wish to retrieve is in fact not something old but a new sort of Christianity, alive to the exigencies of political life.³¹

Machiavelli's solution to the political problem of Christianity has a rough theology that equates God with *fortuna* or chance as its scaffold. In chapter 6 of *The Prince*, in his discussion of great ancient founders, Machiavelli indicates that a collusion between virtue and fortune allowed their potential for greatness to be set to work: "As one examines their actions and lives, one does not see that they had anything else from fortune than opportunity, which gave them the matter enabling them to introduce any form they pleased." In this relationship between virtue and fortune, virtue is the superior partner, as Machiavelli's evocation of the Aristotelian form-matter distinction suggests. Importantly, this verdict about virtue and fortune embraces Moses, as well as Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus. While Machiavelli initially states that Moses "was a mere executor of things that had been ordered for him by God," it turns out that Moses needed "to find the people of Israel in Egypt, enslaved and oppressed," so that they would be "disposed to follow him." In this account, God is providential; he supplies virtuous souls with the matter their virtue can subsequently form. Machiavelli reasserts the implicit equation between God and fortune in the penultimate chapter of *The Prince*. Many hold that "worldly things are so governed by fortune and by God, that men cannot correct them with their prudence . . . ; and on account of this they might judge that one need not sweat much over things but let oneself be governed by chance" (25). Nonetheless, it is only "suitable virtue" that can dike the flood of mayhem that fortune instigates. Again, we note the equation of fortune and God, an equation that has the effect of rendering divine actions not only inscrutable but opposed to the interests of humanity. The implication of divine providence from chapter 6 is now withdrawn. Thus, whether one believes in God or not, the result is the same: both God and fortune are to be resisted by human virtue. Machiavelli offers no explicit argument in favor of this equation; his proof rests with his readers' direct experience of the fortuitousness of nature, human and nonhuman. Nonetheless, if divine actions are indeed as fortuitous as random chance, then the verdict of chapter 15, rendering the good a work of the imagination, is completely persuasive, as is the cyclic rise and fall of regimes, the account of which inaugurates the *Discourses*.³²

The consequences of this equation of God and fortune for Machiavelli's views on Christianity in the *Discourses* are various. First, it renders a core conviction of Christianity, God's providential care for humanity, moot; in so doing, it focuses the reader wholly on the "worldly things" bereft of any

supernatural support. Thus it makes clear the nontheological character of a civil religion, even one employing the trappings of Christian ritual. At the same time, it makes a civil religion that maintains the pretense of belief necessary, lest citizens be overwhelmed by impotence in the face of God and fortune—an impotence that currently weakens those Christian subjects imbued with providential expectations. By taking seriously a teaching about divine providence, in short, Machiavelli can assert the basic identity of a providential God with fortune and thus undermine the very notion of divine providence that allows for the equation of God and fortune in the first place.³³

Machiavelli does not elaborate upon the contours of this new civil religion, now Christian in name only. That task is undertaken by others—for example, by Bacon, in his *The New Atlantis*, by Spinoza, in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, and later by Rousseau.³⁴ The case of Bacon is particularly instructive, given his proximity to and endorsement of Machiavelli.³⁵ In his political allegory, *The New Atlantis*, Bacon proposes a Christianity singularly devoid of doctrine but conducive to the scientific-technological goals of the island utopia of Bensalem he describes. The question “Are ye Christians?” are the first words spoken to the islanders, suggestive of religion’s centrality to the life of the island utopia. Bensalemite Christianity, however, emerges as an increasingly strange affair, blending symbols from Judaism, Roman paganism, and Zoroastrianism, in addition to Christianity. The suggestion is of a nonsectarian and hence irenic Christianity, free from the strife plaguing Christian Europe. Yet at no point are the tenets of this religion revealed. Bensalemite Christianity informs only the public identity of Bensalem’s citizens, one illustration of which is the near-universal anonymity of its citizens; even the scientist-fathers who direct the technological progress of the island are known only by their specific tasks. The only citizen identified by name is the Jewish merchant, Joabin, who, in his Judaism, stands apart from the near-comprehensive Christian profession of the island. In this respect, Bacon follows Machiavelli, and his apparent praise of Roman paganism: since Roman paganism was composed of rituals rather than doctrines, it never degenerated into sectarian strife: “The quarrels and divisions about religion were evils unknown to the heathens.”³⁶

Much more, of course, could be said regarding Bacon’s proposal for civil religion. Yet, while it is Bacon and others who attempt an explicit rendering of the new modern version of civil religion, it is Machiavelli who establishes

the basis for their attempts to fashion a civil religion from the same Christianity that would seem to resist it. Machiavelli, rather than the gospel, shows the way for his readers to “make all things new.”

NOTES

1. See, for example, Augustine, *De civitate Dei* (*City of God*) 5.19 and 5.24; see also the commentary by Ernest L. Fortin, “The Political Thought of St. Augustine,” in *Classical Christianity and the Political Order*, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 1–29.

2. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 9. In addition to Strauss’s celebrated account of Machiavelli’s political teaching, there is, more recently, Catherine H. Zuckert’s excellent analysis of the entire ambit of Machiavelli’s thought: Zuckert, *Machiavelli’s Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

3. *Discourses* 1.13. Passages from Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* are from the translation by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); numerals indicate book and chapter. Passages from *The Prince* are from Mansfield’s translation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); numerals indicate chapters.

4. Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 102, 104. Others who share a similar view of Machiavelli’s commitment to traditional Christian moral teaching include Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), and Dante Germino, “Second Thoughts on Leo Strauss’s Machiavelli,” *Journal of Politics* 28 (1966): 794–817.

5. Vickie Sullivan, “Neither Christian nor Pagan: Machiavelli’s Treatment of Religion in the *Discourses*,” *Polity* 26 (1993): 259–80.

6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), book 4, chapter 8. Rousseau writes:

Religion, considered in relation to society, which is either general or particular, may also be divided into two kinds: the religion of man, and that of the citizen. The first

... is the religion of the Gospel pure and simple, the true theism, what may be called natural divine right or law. The other, which is codified in a single country, gives its gods, its own tutelary patrons; it has its dogmas, its rites, and its external cult prescribed by law. . . . Of this kind were all the religions of early peoples, which we may define as civil or positive divine right or law.

7. It is important to keep in mind that while Machiavelli writes at times with great boldness regarding religion, he is nonetheless veiling aspects of his argument, as he suggests in *The Prince* 18. There, he mentions Chiron the Centaur, who “taught covertly” the truths of politics to future princes of Greece. In *Discourses* 3.48, Machiavelli draws attention to obvious mistakes that ought to be taken for subterfuge: one “ought not to put faith in an error that the enemy is evidently seen to make, for fraud will always be underneath it. . . . But often the desire to conquer blinds the spirits of men who do not see what appears to be done for them.” Returning to *The Prince*, we recall Machiavelli’s general judgment about human beings: “For the vulgar are taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in the world there is no one but the vulgar” (*The Prince* 18).

8. See especially Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chaps. 16–21, where Machiavelli redefines a series of Christian virtues in light of the absence of any notion of a highest good; he pairs a virtue with its opposite in order to indicate that no virtue is, as Aristotle indicates, good in itself. Summarily, he writes, “A prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things for which men are held good, since he is often under a necessity . . . of acting against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion.” At the same time, though, “a prince should thus take great care that nothing escape his mouth that is not full of the above-mentioned five qualities . . . he should appear all

mercy, all faith, all honesty, all humanity, all religion" (*The Prince* 18). It is noteworthy that Machiavelli inaugurates this chapter with mention of Chiron's esoteric teaching.

9. Descartes and Rousseau follow Machiavelli in this preference for Sparta over Athens. In the *Discourse on Method*, pt. 2, Descartes notes, "If Sparta flourished greatly in the past . . . it was because all its laws tended toward the same end." Rousseau, in his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, praises Spartan civic and martial virtue over Athenian intellectual cultivation.

10. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, preface: "Considering thus how much honor is awarded to antiquity . . . and seeing, on the other hand, that the most virtuous works the histories show us . . . are rather admired than imitated . . . I can do no other than marvel and grieve."

11. See also Plato, *Republic* 386a–388d, concerning the need to tell the guardians stories about Achilles that emphasize his fear of death, in order to moderate their *thumos* (spiritedness).

12. See Machiavelli, *The Prince* 12: commenting on the disunity the church engendered in Italy, Machiavelli remarks that "the priests and the other citizens" of the papal states "did not have knowledge of arms," and were therefore compelled to hire mercenaries.

13. There are important exceptions to this rule: Romulus, for example, whose ferocity makes custom irrelevant along with Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus (mentioned along with Romulus in Machiavelli, *The Prince* 6).

14. Note especially the contrast with Moses, whom Machiavelli includes among the "armed prophets," along with Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus.

15. Note the Machiavellian inspiration at the outset of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Martin D. Yaffe (Newburyport, Mass.: Focus Publishing, 2004), preface.xvii: "Nothing regulates a multitude more effectively than superstition. Hence it comes about that they are easily induced by a show of religion now to adore their Kings as Gods, and again to execrate and detest them as the common disease of the human race."

16. Note Descartes's repetition of this view of religion in the first maxim of his *morale par provision*, *Discourse on Method*, pt. 3.

17. See Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.3; and Valerius Maximus, *Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium* 1.5.3.

18. See also Machiavelli, *The Prince* 18: "For the vulgar are taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in the world there is no one but the vulgar." See also *The Prince* 25; *Discourses* 2.1.

19. When Machiavelli uses the term "virtue"—*virtù*—he intends a particular combination of force and calculation, or *prudenza*. His redefining of the traditional moral terminology is an important element of his rhetorical strategy; it represents his attempt to, in effect, "kill the sons of Brutus" by despoiling the language of their moral doctrines.

20. Machiavelli makes this same criticism in *The Prince* 12: once the pope "gained much reputation in temporal affairs, Italy divided into many states . . . since Italy had almost fallen into the hands of the Church and a few republics, and since the priests and the other citizens did not have knowledge of arms, they called in foreigners." Machiavelli will return to these themes later, in *Discourses* 21.

21. Note the assertion Francis Bacon makes in "On Unity in Religion": "The quarrels and divisions about religion were evils unknown to the heathen. . . . But the true God hath this attribute, that He is a *jealous God*, and therefore his worship and religion will endure no mixture nor partner."

22. See Marsilius, *Defensor pacis* 1.5–6. Note, too, that in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante places all the popes but one in hell.

23. Both in the *Discourses* and *The Prince* Machiavelli understands freedom as security in one's property; see *Discourses* 1.5 and 1.16; *The Prince* 19. See Zuckert's discussion of *Discourses* 1.37 in *Machiavelli's Politics*, 160–62.

24. Machiavelli typically presents Savonarola as a political rather than a religious figure, and in particular as a Florentine patriot fighting in defense of freedom. Further, it is from Savonarola that Machiavelli acquires the advice to "kill the sons of Brutus" in order to secure freedom for a new regime threatened by partisan enemies. Here, Machiavelli is in part attempting to explain his failure. See *Discourses* 1.11; also Machiavelli's letter to Vettori, August 26, 1513, and to Guicciardini, May 17, 1521. See

also Savonarola's *Prediche sui Salmi* (Sermons on the Psalms), October 11, 1495.

25. In *Paradiso*, canto 11, a Dominican friar praises Saint Francis; in canto 12, a Franciscan offers an encomium of Saint Dominic. Machiavelli's remarks may have been influenced directly by Dante; note Dante's carnal description of the marriage between Lady Poverty and Saint Francis.

26. We note in passing that in stating this, Machiavelli endorses the Aristotelian opinion concerning the eternity of the world. Although otherwise critical of Platonic-Aristotelian political philosophy, Machiavelli finds Aristotle an ally in opposing a conviction central to biblical religion—namely, that the world is created *ex nihilo*.

27. See Arnaldo Momigliano's account of the effect of early Christian histories, in particular Eusebius's, on pagan history: Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).

28. In this context, note Machiavelli's approval of Ferdinand of Aragon's savagery under the guise of Christianity: *The Prince* 21. Machiavelli consistently refers to him as "Ferdinand the Catholic."

29. Mansfield and Tarcov note this point in their translation of *Discourses* in the footnote at 2.8 (p. 145).

30. De Grazia sees certain Christian rituals—for example, the Eucharistic consumption of the body and blood of Christ—as a possible basis for a fittingly sanguinary Christian imagery (De Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell*, 102). See, however, Sullivan, "Neither Christian nor Pagan," 264.

31. It should be noted, against de Grazia and in agreement with Sullivan, that there is no need to impute even a novel sort of Christian piety to Machiavelli to accept this solution to the problem Christianity poses as a civil

religion, especially since Machiavelli has made it clear in his remarks about "religion used well" that the "few" do not need to believe it for the religion to be effective.

32. Descartes mimics this Machiavellian theology by defining God as both a perfect and an infinite being; as perfect, God's providential alteration of the "nature" of nature becomes impossible, and God's infinity precludes the comprehensibility of nonhuman natural ends. See *Discourses* 4 and 5; *Meditation* 3 and 4.

33. For an alternative account, see Miguel Vatter, "Machiavelli and the Republican Conception of Providence," *Review of Politics* 75 (2013): 605–23. Vatter argues that religion, for Machiavelli, is not merely an instrument of political rule, but rather politics is an instrument of divine providence, albeit a conception of divine providence more at home in Judaism and Islam than in Christianity.

34. See David C. Innes, "Bacon's *New Atlantis*," in *Piety and Humanity: Essays on Religion and Early Modern Political Philosophy*, ed. Douglas Kries (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 49–77; Richard Kennington, "Bacon's Humanitarian Revision of Machiavelli," in *On Modern Origins: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004), 57–77; Martin D. Yaffe, "Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*—A First Inside Look," in Kries, *Piety and Humanity*, 109–33.

35. See Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *Works*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), 8:475: "We are much beholden to Machiavelli and others who write what men do and not what they ought to do."

36. Francis Bacon, *Essays Civil and Moral*, in Spedding, Ellis, and Heath, *Works*, 12:86.

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CHAPTER 2

How Francis Bacon's *New Organon* Co-opts Biblical Theology for His *New Atlantis*

MARTIN D. YAFFE

I.

Francis Bacon traces the contours of his unprecedented high-tech society of the future in his philosophical parable *New Atlantis*.¹ Establishment of this society has two basic prerequisites that are more than strictly political. One prerequisite is the refounding, or “fresh start” (*instauratio*), of the science inherited from the ancients (especially Aristotle) so as to reorient it toward the practical goal of the conquest of nature for “the relief of man’s estate”—that is, for the improvement of the human condition by means of scientific technology.² The refounding of science is sketched aphoristically in Bacon’s *New Organon*. The other prerequisite is the co-opting of biblical theology so as to recast Christianity as a civil religion for that society. The co-opting of theology is on display throughout the *New Atlantis*—notably, in “Bensalem,” the remote Pacific island society’s quasi-biblical name; in “Salomon’s House,” also called the “College of the Six Days’ Works,” the island’s governing research, development, and manufacturing complex; and in the scientifically attested “miracle” offshore establishing Christianity as Bensalem’s official religion.³ Not surprisingly, Bacon’s co-opting of theology also shows up, intermittently but strikingly, in the *New Organon*. Among other things, traditional and/or commonsense notions obstructing scientific

discovery of the laws of nature are “idols” that require “extirpation,” “discovery” (*inventio*) guided by method is comparable to God’s creation of the world in Genesis 1, and scientific knowledge is a construct resembling King Salomon’s “holy temple” (I.70, 120).⁴ As in his *New Atlantis*, so in his *New Organon*, the newly co-opted theology underwrites a biblically based civil religion needed to encourage both scientific progress⁵ and the intellectual innovativeness required for it, though limited to its horizon.

To see Bacon’s co-opting of biblical theology at work, I look first at how the three theological notions just mentioned—idols, creation of the world, Salomon’s temple—enter into the *New Organon*’s overall argument for scientific progress (sections II–IV, below). I then consider how the *New Atlantis*’s civil religion addresses some potential hindrances to scientific progress that fall outside the purview of science itself (section V). These the *New Organon* acknowledges mostly in passing: the inherent susceptibility of human understanding to human passions, the new science’s conceivably prompting new metaphysical obscurantism, and the new science’s ongoing need for institutional support.⁶ The civil religion of the *New Atlantis* would preempt each of the potential hindrances, thanks to its transference of the seat of religious authority—or, more exactly, of “reverence”⁷—to Salomon’s House (section VI).

II.

What is an “idol”? Bacon appropriates this term selectively from both Plato and the Hebrew Bible. Like a Platonic *eidolon*, or image, Baconian idols are products of the imagination—though unlike Plato’s images, they are not said to depend on the things of which they are images⁸ but originate somehow independently. Like the biblical idols, moreover, Baconian idols are false representations of God and/or supposed gods⁹—though unlike the biblical idols, they are said to misrepresent not merely divinities or pseudo-divinities but nature as such. Idols for Bacon are epistemically vacuous and delusional. They require “extirpation” from potential knowers for scientific enlightenment to be possible.

Alerting readers in advance to the *New Organon*’s extirpation process is an all-too-brief aphorism introducing the term “idols” and contrasting these with scientific knowledge proper: “There is no slight difference between the idols of the human mind and the ideas of the divine mind—that is,

between some empty conceits and the true signatures and impressions made in creatures as they are discovered" (I.23; cf. I.124). This aphorism, couched as it is in theological terms at least initially, turns out to be somewhat enigmatic, certainly at this early stage of Bacon's argument. It starts simply enough by distinguishing the so-called idols of the human mind from the ideas of the divine mind, and it goes on to explain idols (as if they needed explaining to the theologically informed) as "empty conceits." But it quickly concludes rather intricately and perplexingly by correlating the ideas of the divine mind with the "true signatures and impressions" somehow "made in creatures" as they—the creatures? the signatures and impressions?—are "discovered." The aphorism's suddenly complicated conclusion is not amenable to quick elucidation. The mention of "creatures" supplies the only obvious link between its theological beginning and its not exactly theological ending (especially if "creating" is to be understood nontheologically, as in the antitheological Lucretius, whom the *New Organon* quotes much later, in I.129).¹⁰ To anticipate where the *New Organon* is headed, we may say that the true signatures and impressions made in creatures are ultimately to be understood mechanically and genetically rather than theologically, and the discovery in question refers, on the one hand, to the natural emergence of creatures from their subliminal origins (i.e., to their "uncovering"; II.5) and, on the other hand, to understanding that emergence by mapping and tracking it, as we post-Baconians say, scientifically (II.1–2, 4–5, 9). Bacon's aphorism is formulated to move readers away from its theological starting point toward an appreciation for purely scientific discovery. Its theological surface covers its more than theological depth.

To extirpate idols is, literally, to take out their *stirps*, or stem, as distinct from their root. Idols, as images, are too deeply rooted in human beings, it seems, to be eradicated. The best we can do is to get them out of the way as they emerge. Bacon traces their emergence so as to let us know how we must and can intervene to stop them from interfering with scientific discovery. His approach to knowing for the sake of intervening here previews his full-blown approach to knowing for the sake of intervening in natural processes as such—that is, for the sake of conquering them by diverting or bending them to our will as needed and possible.

Idols stem from four manifest sources. Bacon names them accordingly (I.38–44): idols of the tribe (I.45–52), idols of the cave (I.53–58), idols of the marketplace (I.59–60), idols of the theater (I.61–70). At first glance, the

four appear listed in random order. But those later in the list turn out to be extensions and refinements of those listed earlier. Idols of the tribe, or of the (human) race, are images generated by the human body as such, more exactly by the five senses. These represent nature merely as displayed by our specifically human receptors (as sights, sounds, etc.)—that is, “anthropocentrically” (as we say)—whereas the images themselves are said to result from subliminal processes that invite being understood nonanthropocentrically, or nonidolatrously, in terms of the discernible patterns of those processes—what Bacon calls the “forms” or “laws” of those processes or, more generally, laws of nature understood as laws of motion (I.51, 75; II.2, 4–5, 9).¹¹ Idols of the cave are images generated in addition by each individual’s unique physiology and psyche. These skew humans’ grasp of things further idiosyncratically. Idols of the marketplace are images that then come, says Bacon, from the words humans use in speaking and dealing with one another in society. These images he characterizes as “most troublesome,” since “words are imposed to suit the grasp of the vulgar” and “the bad and inept imposition of words besets the understanding in marvelous modes” (I.59). Finally, idols of the theater—the most subtle and wide-ranging of images, according to Bacon—are said to “have immigrated into the psyches of human beings from the diverse dogmas of philosophies and also the laws of perverse demonstrations”—that is, from the influence of philosophical doctrines and the patterns of twisted arguments used to support them (I.44, 61). These idols are so named because Bacon “reckon[s] them as so many dramatic-plots¹² produced and acted which have made for fictitious and staged worlds.”

Extirpating idols of the theater is a shorthand description of the overall task of part I of the two parts of the *New Organon*, preparing as it does for part II’s aphorisms spelling out the new approach to philosophy or science itself. Part I’s extirpation process involves not only *purifying* previous philosophy or science from its having been infected by fictitious images—that is, by “myths” in today’s sense of the word—but also *reconfiguring* philosophy or science with a view to immunizing it from being reinfected—or rather, given that what generates “myths” is at bottom ineradicable, to making philosophy or science self-immunizing as far as possible. Here Bacon looks to religion for help (I.68, 79). Help comes by way of assigning to a reconfigured philosophy or science and a reconstrued biblical theology two ostensibly parallel, non-competing roles (I.65)¹³ and, at the same time, adducing biblical references

as needed to underwrite their seamless cooperation. Bacon's simultaneous delineation and coordination between his new science of laws of nature and his old-new anti-idolatrous theology show up especially in the *New Organon's* aforementioned references to divine creation and the biblical temple.

III.

The comparison of scientific discovery with God's creation of the world occurs in the wake of Bacon's earlier warning that neither Genesis 1 nor the book of Job or any other biblical book affords a proper basis for natural science (*Novum Organum* I.70; cf. I.63). His comparison is thus not cosmological but methodological: "In the true run-through of experience when leading it on to new works, the divine wisdom and order have to be taken as altogether exemplary. On the first day of creation . . . God created light only and allotted the entire day to that work. Similarly, the discovery of causes and true axioms has to be elicited first from experience of every mode—and light-bearing, not fruit-bearing experiments have to be sought" (I.70). Bacon is cautioning against hasty or narrow appeals to experience (i.e., against generalizing from narrowly conceived observations or experiments) when trying to discover how "causes and true axioms"—or laws—could lead to new practical "discoveries" or, to retranslate his pivotal Latin term by its English cognate, to "inventions." His cautionary examples are Gilbert, who theorized all too hastily from his experimenting with magnets that the earth itself is held in place by magnetism, and the alchemists, who theorized all too hastily from their furnace experiments how base metals might be transmuted into gold.¹⁴ Bacon's larger point is that his new science, while subject to the test of practical success, is still science. It stands or falls with sound theory. This requires, to begin with, experiments that are, as Bacon says, "light-bearing" rather than "fruit-bearing"—that is, that merely illuminate the way to the fruits (I.73, 82). By fruits, he means the useful products of scientific discoveries—that is to say, inventions, which he often calls simply "works." He looks to God as his role model. Only after creating light and nothing else on day one of creation did God use the light during the next six days when creating and contemplating his subsequent, materialized works (I.93).

Yet Bacon is far from assuming that an appeal to theology is enough to correct, say, the alchemists in their attempts at synthesizing gold. He goes on to show how, in general, syntheses of new materials from old ones could

be brought about more successfully (I.85, end). Gold comes up twice as a conspicuous example during his highly compressed discussion of method at the outset of part II—where the new science is described as knowledge enabling one to “super-induce” new natures onto a given body (II.1). “If someone longed to super-induce the yellow color of gold or an increase of weight on silver (while keeping to the laws of the material),” Bacon says breezily as his first, almost throwaway example of super-inducing (II.4). A more consequential follow-up occurs soon afterward, where he outlines two methods for discovering how a given body or set of bodies could in principle be transformed into, for example, gold (II.5). One method would be to look at gold “as a troop or conjoining of simple natures”—gold’s specific color, density, malleability, nonvolatility and nonshrinkage under flame, moment and manner of separating or dissolving, “and similarly about the remaining natures that run together [*concurrunt*] in gold.” By this method, synthesizing gold would mean knowing the separate behavior patterns (or “laws”) of its manifest qualities beforehand and then figuring out how to put them together. The other method would require looking at gold as it emerges as a “concrete” body “in nature in its ordinary course” and then probing the process by which it has emerged “from its first *menstrua* or rudiments up to the complete mineral”—as one would likewise need to do to as regards the emergence of plants or animals, by starting at each’s earliest discernible stage of development. Either of these two methods of producing, replicating, or for that matter altering gold or any other body is perhaps more easily said than done, but in any case Bacon’s larger point is that the “laws” governing the composition of the qualities of the body in question and/or the sequence of its emerging phases must be known independently through meticulous observations and wide-ranging experiments before any conjoining, generating, or altering becomes possible in practice. Meanwhile Genesis 1 is invoked to correct Gilbert and the alchemists by lending theological authority to the broader scope of the necessary empirical starting points and procedures for new discoveries or works—or syntheses, as we may now call them.

IV.

The strictly political dimension of the *New Organon*’s overall synthesizing and resynthesizing project shows up in that it takes many hands and minds, not

just Bacon's, and these need centralized direction. Bacon anticipates, among other things, that potential researchers may balk at getting their hands dirty by having to experiment with vile or shameful materials, such as civet (anal secretions from carnivorous quadrupeds) or musk (glandular secretions from musk deer), to help compile the vast, tabulated "natural history" of observational and experimental data from which true and useful laws of nature's behavior are to be drawn (I.120; cf. II.10–52). Partly, he can exhort the fastidious, as he does, that "as sometimes the best odors [i.e., perfumes] are generated from some putrid materials such as civet and musk, so too exceptional light and information sometimes emanate from vile and sordid instances." Meanwhile he must also persuade hands-on researchers-to-be of the unimpeachable dignity of the joint project to which they would be contributing, by suggesting how it merits divine approval: "We are not dedicating or building some capitol or pyramid to human beings' pride . . . but a holy temple in the human understanding on the model of the world" (I.120). The new science under construction, he is suggesting, is the biblical "holy temple" now relocated in the human understanding. Like Salomon's temple, it is a divinely authorized construct, although or because Bacon's blueprint for it is the world itself—not the world as it shows up to the human senses (that would be an idol) but the patterns of its motions as discerned, compiled, systematized, and disseminated as laws of nature. The broader political implications here, latent as they are in the *New Organon*, come to sight more fully in the institution of Salomon's House in Bacon's *New Atlantis*.

The *New Atlantis* exploits a grammatical ambiguity in the biblical text, which speaks of Salomon's "house" sometimes as the royal residence (the home base for Salomon's widely admired discourses on plants and animals)¹⁵ and sometimes as the temple itself. Bacon merges these two meanings. Of course he modifies the original details. His Salomon's House is both a state-of-the-art research and manufacturing facility and a restricted-entry seat of religious authority. Seldom does any of its governing body of thirty-six scientists appear as such in public, though when one does he is elaborately paraded in a chariot, decorously robed as a high priest, and worshipfully addressed as Father (§§69–71). Salomon's House combines rare yet unforgettable religious spectacles with its routinely secret laboratory activities and products.

As for why, consider its behind-the-scenes connections with a religious spectacle elsewhere in the *New Atlantis*—the miracle at sea said to have

brought Christianity to Bensalem in the mid-first century A.D. (§§47–49). A pillar of light was seen to shine from a bright cross in the sky off Bensalem's east-coast fishing port. An invisible barrier stopped fishermen's boats from viewing the pillar up close, but a boat with a scientist from Salomon's House got through after he declared its miraculous character by bowing toward it, raising his hands to heaven, and praying aloud. The scientist's prayer began, "Lord God of heaven and earth, thou hast vouchsafed of thy grace to those of our order, to know thy works of creation, and the secrets of them; and to discern . . . between divine miracles, works of nature, works of art, and impostures and illusions of all sorts" (§48). The pillar then dissolved to reveal a small ark containing a Bible and a letter from the evangelist Saint Bartholomew seeking (and winning) Bensalem's official religious conversion.¹⁶ Remarkable here is the scientist's professed ability to differentiate divine miracles from "impostures and illusions." Later in the *New Atlantis*, a present-day Father of Salomon's House, speaking privately to the book's narrator, lists its impressive capabilities. These turn out to include lens laboratories (called "perspective houses") capable of projecting light beams to simulate celestial phenomena as visual "delusions and deceits," and video-production studios (called "houses of deceits of the senses") capable of displaying "all manner of feats of juggling, false apparitions, impostures and illusions [*sic*], and their fallacies," such as would "deceive the senses, if we would disguise those things and labour to make them seem more miraculous" (§§77–78, 80). Evidently Salomon's House was perfectly capable of fabricating—or synthesizing—Bensalem's Christian "miracle." If so, the seeming parallelism between Baconian science and its corresponding civil religion would need restating with emphasis on the *seeming*. Bensalem's Christianity is the indispensable public-relations arm of Salomon's House.

v.

Whereas the *New Organon* presents Baconian science as an untried if urgent project, the *New Atlantis* dramatizes its fulfillment in a fictional political setting whose civil religion is closely fitted to it. In the course of the drama, key notions of traditional theology are quietly reworked. Salvation of the soul shows up in Bensalem itself as bodily health, security, and comfort, but little more. Contemplation of God and his ways recedes in favor of appreciation for the scientific research of Salomon's House.

And miracles turn out to be coterminous with technological achievements such as we have already glimpsed in the island's conversion to Christianity. These hermeneutical alterations serve to minimize or bypass the aforementioned potential hindrances to scientific progress that the *New Organon* has noted in passing. Let me say more about how each of these shows up in the *New Organon*, so as to indicate how the *New Atlantis*'s civil religion would render them moot.

The *New Organon* calls attention to the first such hindrance, the understanding's susceptibility to human passions, by alluding to a Heraclitean expression: the human understanding, says Bacon, is not that "of a dry lamp" (I.49). The meaning here is that a human being's all-too-human passions unwittingly dampen his understanding. Far from being or remaining pure, the understanding, in Bacon's words, "receives infusion from the will and the passions" so as to "generate sciences for what it wishes." Human beings, he implies, are open to science only to the extent that it tells them what they already wish or prefer to believe is true. Expecting a human being to be willing and eager to accept or pursue science simply for its own sake is accordingly unrealistic: "He rejects difficult things, from impatience in inquiring; sobering things, since they squash hope; the deeper things of nature, on account of superstition; the lamp of experience, on account of arrogance and disdain lest the mind seem to be engaged in things vile and in flux; paradoxes, on account of the opinion of the vulgar; finally, passion imbues and infects the understanding in innumerable modes, these being meanwhile imperceptible" (I.49).

The *New Organon* addresses each of these obstacles to science—impatience (I.103), immoderate hopes (I.112), superstition (I.89, 109), arrogance (I.83, 119–20), commonplace opinions (I.115), and so on—somewhat further in the context of other aphorisms. Nowhere does it suggest, however, that they can be completely neutralized—except, of course, within the parameters of the new science, narrowly focused as it is on the meticulous mapping and tracking of laws of nature.¹⁷ But how are prospective scientists to be persuaded to overcome such obstacles and become devotees of the new science in the first place? We have already seen Bacon appealing to theology, in his way, with a view to prompting second thoughts among those attracted to, say, the experiments of Gilbert or the alchemists—though we do not know from the *New Organon* itself how much success is to be expected in redirecting them. In the *New Atlantis*, by contrast, Baconian theology is

given the full backing of Bensalem's civil religion to predispose Bensalemites favorably toward it.

The second potential hindrance to scientific progress, its conceivably prompting new metaphysical obscurantism, might well arise even or especially with the *New Organon's* practical success. The reason, Bacon suggests, has to do with the "positive" (I.48) or strictly "phenomenal" character of scientific knowledge: "For just as several astrological themes can be configured over-and-above the phenomena of the ether, various dogmas can be founded and established likewise and much more over-and-above the phenomena of philosophy. And the plots of this mode of theater even have what has come into use in the theater of the poets—that narratives feigned for the stage are more enhanced, more elegant, and such as someone would rather wish, than true narratives coming from history" (I.62; cf. I.112, 116).

Bacon is ascribing the emergence of idols of the theater—his term for philosophical dogmas, as we are meant to recall—to human beings' ongoing tendency to superimpose fanciful and wishful doctrines onto phenomena that may be satisfactorily explained in terms of laws of nature. The resulting philosophies are as various—and dubious, Bacon implies—as the various competing astrological doctrines superimposed onto the phenomena of the ether. The philosophies in question fall into three genres:

1. "rational" or "sophistical"—notably Aristotle's, which is vitiated, Bacon submits, by being based on arbitrarily preselected phenomena (I.63)¹⁸
2. "empirical"—Gilbert's and the alchemists', vitiated by being based exclusively on narrowly conceived experiments (I.64)
3. "superstitious"—Pythagoras's and especially Plato's, vitiated by being a mix of philosophy with superstitious theology (I.65)

Of these philosophies, that of "Plato and his school" is said to be the most widespread and the worst, evidently for its inducing a theologically authorized philosophical complacency.¹⁹ Bacon traces its "fanciful, swollen, and as it were poetical" admixture with superstition to the human understanding's susceptibility to the "impressions of fancy"—with the result that even or especially the intellects of the philosophically minded are receptive to the flattery (or vain images of self-importance) instilled by superstitious doctrines. The salutary and sober alternative, Bacon concludes, is to restrict the authority of theology to matters of faith. Such is the *New Atlantis's* solution

as well, provided that we keep in mind Bacon's hermeneutical reconstruction of traditional theology. Bensalem's civil religion preserves traditional theology's distinctive notions (e.g., "miracles") but drains their inner sense of anything superstitious or superhuman. Meanwhile it fills the Bensalemites' religious life with engaging histories (or stories, e.g., of Bensalem's conversion to Christianity) and elaborate practices (e.g., as we shall see, the Feast of the Family, and Adam and Eve's Pools) that are congenial to the aims and activities of Salomon's House—so as to leave little room or inclination for idle metaphysical speculation.

About the third potential hindrance to scientific progress, its need for institutional support, the *New Organon* is more straightforward:

It is enough to inhibit the advancement of the sciences that endeavors and industriousness of this sort lack rewards. For the cultivation of sciences and the reward are not up to the same individuals. For advancements in the sciences come forth from great intellects everywhere; yet the costs and rewards of the sciences are up to men, commonplace or princely, whose learning is barely mediocre (unless quite rarely). Indeed, progress of this sort has been destitute not only of rewards and of the beneficence of human beings, but also of popular praise itself. For it is over-and-above the grasp of the greatest part of human beings and is easily overturned and extinguished by the winds of commonplace opinions. (I.91)

So long as scientific progress is left to individuals working spontaneously on their own, Bacon is saying, they may be blocked by the forbidding costs of gathering data and conducting experiments, as well as by the disincentives of being unrewarded for their efforts and disapproved of, suppressed, and/or forgotten by the scientifically illiterate. To counter these obstacles, the *New Organon* showcases impressive discoveries ("inventions") already in widespread use (I.109, 110, 129)²⁰ and anticipates more to come with proper outside encouragement and support. Meanwhile Bacon also stipulates that scientists themselves make themselves "literate," or informed in detail about one another's work, so as to be able to build on others' work fruitfully rather than risk duplicating it unwittingly and counterproductively (I.101, 103, 110). For its part, the *New Atlantis*'s Salomon's House is designed to meet those requirements: its scientists are funded either by the state or by sales of their products, housed in a protected campus, equipped with all necessary

laboratories and materials, honored for their research, and in close and autonomous communication among themselves (68–83).

VI.

The combined mystique and sovereignty of Salomon's House may be seen in what Bensalemites are said to hold in reverence. The *New Atlantis* characterizes five different persons or moments as either entitled to or displaying reverence. Each appears at a pivotal point in the drama being narrated. Overall, the *New Atlantis*'s narrator recounts "a kind of miracle" (§43) whereby his wind-tossed, disoriented, provision-depleted ship eventually sighted an uncharted island (Bensalem), whose civilized inhabitants initially waved the ship off but soon offered its sailors gracious hospitality and, not long afterward, permanent immigration. As the narrative proceeds, the distinguishing features of Bensalem's way of life—its historical origins, family life, and domination by Salomon's House—gradually come to light. Together, the five reverend persons and reverence-showing moments indicate the strictly complementary role of Bensalem's civil religion.

The first Bensalemite characterized as "reverend" is a senior coast-guard official, who approaches the ship in command of a pair of well-manned, gilt-edged boats and permits the sailors to land only if they are Christians and swear that they are not pirates and have not shed blood recently (§39). He is following up an earlier reception by a junior coast-guard official, who had presented the sailors with a scroll adorned with Christian insignia (and written in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Spanish) forbidding them to land and ordering them to depart within sixteen days unless given an extension, yet meanwhile granting fresh water, medical aid, and vessel repair such as "belongeth to mercy." The title to reverence the narrator ascribes to the senior official thus seems to rest on his being a fellow Christian exercising Christian mercy—though it is ascribed explicitly in the context of the narrator's admiring description of the official's notably dignified bearing and spectacularly high-fashion oriental clothing, which later turns out to have been most likely designed and manufactured in Salomon's House (§77). "A reverend man was he to behold," remarks the narrator matter-of-factly. The official's entourage, of course, consists of some thirty-four crewmen, perhaps uniformed and presumably armed—as if to dramatize that the reverence owed him stems as well from Bensalem's show of political authority.

Consider also the official's personal apology, conveyed through a subordinate, for remaining in his own boat and not boarding the sailors' ship as the junior official had—namely, his being “warned by the Conservator of Health of the city that he should keep a distance.” Evidently Bensalem qualifies its exercise of Christian mercy by considering its own interests and welfare.

A second “reverend person” is the governor of Strangers' House (Bensalem's visitor's hostel), who identifies himself as a Christian priest and shares the Christian piety that the narrator urges the sailors to display during their three-day quarantine prior to meeting with him (§§46–49). The sailors call him “reverend” after hearing him grant them an extended stay with freedom of the city—perhaps out of genuine appreciation that, thanks to him, they can now relax their efforts at behaving like pious Christians! Only some of the more well-bred sailors meet with him the next day at Strangers' House, when he arrives for a two-day question-and-answer session. He answers the sailors' first question, about how the out-of-the-way island became Christian, by detailing the history of Bensalem's conversion, including the display of “reverence” by the ancient scientist—whose actions I have already commented on. But the governor describes the scientist merely as “one of the wise men of the society of Salomon's House”—and the latter merely as a “college” that “is the very eye of the kingdom”—conspicuously briefly and almost in passing. Maybe he means to let the sailors ask about these separately, as they do in effect when he returns the following day. Then again, maybe not. Consider that when he pauses after glorifying Saint Bartholomew's evangelism as “miraculous,” a messenger interrupts to call him away—as if “eye of the kingdom” somehow meant that Salomon's House is not just the island's focal point, but its video camera and behavior monitor as well (see §§77–78). The governor is long on the pious details of the “miracle” he is relating but short (or cut short) on connecting these with the full range of capabilities of Salomon's House, which the narrative discloses only later. Nor is this shortcoming rectified the next day when the governor answers the sailors' second question, about how Bensalem knows other nations' “languages, books, affairs” but not vice versa (§§49–60, with 51, 53, 73).²¹ He tells of a cataclysmic global flood that, having destroyed ancient civilization and commerce, left the island unnoticed and forgotten even as the other nations began to recover. The governor most likely bases his (putatively) historical account—which concerns the aftermath of the otherwise legendary Atlantis's ancient attempt to conquer the Mediterranean—on

Bensalem's (or Salomon's House's) archives. At any rate, he corrects what he calls Plato's "poetical and fabulous" account.²² In the governor's account, Atlantis was not a mid-Atlantic island, as Plato says, but North and South America combined, including Mexico and Peru; moreover, not all of Atlantis, as Plato says, but only Mexico attacked the Mediterranean, while Peru attacked Bensalem, though Bensalem outmaneuvered Peru beforehand and forced it to surrender without firing a shot; finally, "divine revenge" overtook Atlantis not by an earthquake, as Plato says, but by a worldwide flood that forced survivors onto terrestrial heights to live as savages. The governor goes on to say how the island's third-century B.C. king Solamona used its isolation and fecundity to build up its self-sufficiency—by reviving its once-flourishing commerce and shipping, by barring islanders from travel abroad and foreigners from entry except for relief of ships in distress, and by founding Salomon's House. An exception to Solamona's still-enforced travel ban indicates how Bensalem knows about the rest of the world: a select dozen of Salomon's House's scientists regularly sail to various countries under false flags to gather useful information covertly. And an exception to his entry ban indicates how the stranded sailors turn out to be eligible for permanent immigration with state-funded subsidies: Bensalem welcomes approved immigrants after all, presumably from among those arriving on ships in distress. There is more to say here, but the governor does not go into it. He had indicated at the outset that he must omit some sensitive details, in obedience to Bensalem's "laws of secrecy touching strangers." Is he himself privy to those details? Or does he merely follow an assigned script? Once again he says remarkably little about Salomon's House. Knowingly or not, he shortchanges the sailors on pertinent if perhaps unsettling information about its high-tech capabilities, which the narrator subsequently learns of during the private interview with one of its Fathers, which culminates his narrative. That is to say, Salomon's House's "engines" for "multiplying and enforcing of winds" might have prompted the sailors' suspicion that the winds' eventually depositing their ship at the island—and making them candidates for immigration, for reasons we shall see shortly in connection with the population requirements motivating the Feast of the Family—was in Bensalem's control from the outset.

If, as we have been led to suspect from the three instances involving reverence so far, Bensalem's official Christianity plays a strictly complementary role in its public life (its "miraculous" conversion as underwritten by

Salomon's House, its treatment of strangers, etc.), does it play a fuller role in Bensalemites' private life? Not really, if we consider what Bensalemites are said to hold in reverence about its two distinctive practices governing private life—the Feast of the Family, and Adam and Eve's Pools.

The Feast of the Family is a state-sponsored ceremony awarding a pension to a “father” (or patriarch) who has sired thirty living offspring over the age of three (§§60–64).²³ The narrator introduces his detailed description of it by calling it a “most natural, pious, and reverend custom,” though why he does so is not immediately clear. Not having been present at the actual feast (having only heard it described), he is nevertheless intrigued enough to ask about it a week or so later when conversing with a Jewish merchant whom he characterizes as wise, learned, statesmanlike, and well informed about Bensalem's laws and customs.²⁴ Evidently what intrigues the narrator is what the ceremony implies about married life—since that is what he asks him about. The intriguing details include the following. The thirty offspring are bidden to a ceremony that occurs only after the father spends the previous two days with three chosen friends and the local governor (§61)²⁵ to solve any offspring's financial or personal difficulties—to make them all one happy family for that day at least, in case they hadn't been before! Male and female offspring participate more or less equally, since the ceremony consists largely of dressing up, showing up, and lining up for the father's formal blessing—except that sons rather than daughters serve the father's meal, one or two especially meritorious sons may be blessed further, a son is named the father's conspicuously honored companion henceforth, and only a scientist-son (or -daughter?) of Salomon's House can share the father's dais. Meanwhile their “mother” (or matriarch) stays out of sight behind a partition! How is all this “most natural”? The ceremony includes few “pious” moments besides the father's blessings—his two brief absences for private prayer or whatever, and an after-dinner hymn praising biblical fathers (Adam, Noah, and Abraham) and offering thanks for the birth of “our Saviour” (unnamed; it could be Christ, of course, but it could also be Bensalem, or Salomon's House, etc.). These moments may indicate in small part why the narrator also calls the feast “reverend”—but so far reverence has never been ascribed unambiguously, and that may be so here too. Consider, however, that a royal scroll the father receives calls him the king's “well-beloved . . . creditor,” a description Bensalemites explain by saying that “the king is debtor to no man but for propagation of his subjects” (§62). All in

all, the narrator may therefore be intrigued by the ceremony's emphasis on "propagation"—rather than on family as such—as Bensalem's "most natural, pious, and reverend" way of bolstering family life by rewarding "fathers" who both sire (perhaps promiscuously?) the many offspring the island needs for its high-tech functioning and are willing and able to acknowledge the concomitant familial responsibilities possibly neglected by them hitherto. The narrator's conversation with the Jewish merchant will confirm much of the foregoing.

In calling the ceremony "most natural," the narrator turns out to mean that it privileges "nuptial copulation" (§66). With this in mind, he asks the merchant about Bensalemites' marriages over and above their sexual basis—what the marriage laws and customs are, how well their marriages keep, and whether they are monogamous ("tied to one wife"). The merchant reads the narrator's mind in detailing, with due regard for piety and reverence, how the more-than-sexual in Bensalem is superimposed over the merely sexual. A Bensalemite, he says, is expected to "reverence himself," inasmuch as "the reverence of a man's self" is, religion aside, the main restraint of all vices (including by implication sexual ones). He goes on to explain how marriage partners are chosen accordingly, by adducing two quasi-biblical expressions Bensalemites use—"Adam and Eve's Pools" and, as a lead-in to it, "Lot's Offer."²⁶ The latter is Bensalemites' morally contemptuous term for European-style marriage. They say that Europeans, like the biblical Lot, sacrifice marriageable daughters to men with priorities that are not offspring-friendly—sowing wild oats instead of marrying while young and sexually potent; choosing wives for social connections, dowries, and reputations, with offspring an afterthought at best; and hiring prostitutes (tolerated as socially preferable to adulteries, deflowering of virgins, homosexuality, etc.). Bensalem's laws, in contrast, channel "natural" (sexual) desire into child-producing marriages by loosening the requirement of parental consent so as to give freer sway to the libidos of the couple themselves. "Adam and Eve's Pools," then, are Bensalem's alternative to chaperoned ways of promoting happy and faithful marriages, such as letting an engaged couple inspect each other naked under close adult supervision,²⁷ a practice Bensalemites say would make subsequently rejecting one's intended worthy of scorn. Instead their customs leave marriage decisions to the couple themselves while permitting a friend of the groom-to-be to view the bride-to-be, and a friend of the bride-to-be to view the groom-to-be, bathing naked in

gender-segregated pools. Yet the narrator's conversation with the merchant ends without his saying, not explicitly anyway, how exactly appealing to "reverence of a man's self" solves the leftover risk to marital happiness and faithfulness from Bensalemites' replacing respectable chaperons, the proxies of family authority, with unattached voyeurs, whose loyalty belongs primarily to their friends as individuals and could change comparatively easily if and when other "natural" (sexual) attractions come into view. Despite what they say, Bensalemites may well be as sexually wayward as Europeans—unless, of course, considerations relating to the Feast of the Family serve to motivate them, with all due piety and reverence, to redirect their "natural" (sexual) passions for the self-interested purpose of eventually earning a lifetime pension.

Such considerations—otherwise known as enlightened self-interest—seem to be what the merchant implies, and the narrator understands, by "reverence of a man's self." The "self" is not exactly what is traditionally meant by the soul. It is neither natural nor divinely created, but self-made.²⁸ It is, we may say, recalling our earlier discussion of the *New Organon*, "synthetic." Consider in this connection that, when introducing his description of the Feast by calling it "most natural, pious, and reverend," the narrator added that it shows Bensalem to be "compounded of all goodness" (*New Atlantis* 60). Bensalem's "compounded" (composite or synthetic) character determines the character of its civil religion as well. Recall how the *New Organon* treats "discoveries" ("inventions") as composites—mere syntheses of their component parts ("natures," as it calls the simplest of these) (I.121; II.1, 5, 7, 8). Similarly, the *New Atlantis* treats Bensalem more or less as a mere synthesis of its component parts. Its civil religion is a closely fitted component part that does not function beyond its intended use.

NOTES

1. Francis Bacon, "New Atlantis" and "The Great Instauration", ed. Jerry Weinberger (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1989). Arabic numerals in citations of the *New Atlantis* refer to paragraph numbers (unmarked) in Weinberger's text.

2. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (London, 1857–74; Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1961–63), I.3, 103–4, 127–29. Roman

and Arabic numerals in this and subsequent citations indicate the numbered part and aphorism(s) in the original Bacon (1620). All translations of *Novum Organum*'s original Latin are mine except that the rendering "fresh start" is owed to Ralph Lerner, *Naïve Readings: Reveilles Political and Philosophic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 87 (see *Novum Organum* I.31, 38, 92, 115–17). For the other quoted expression, see Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, I.v.11.

3. Bacon, *New Atlantis* ¶¶ 46; 47, 58–59, 71–79; 47–49, 65.

4. I have retained Bacon's spelling of "Solomon" throughout.

5. Or what Bacon calls the "advancement" (*augmentum*) of the sciences; e.g., *Novum Organum* I.31, 80, 81, 91, 93, with I.20, 78, 84. The *New Organon* speaks more often of "progress"; see *Novum Organum* I.74, 80, 84, 90, 92, 99, 115, 128, with I.30, 31, 75, 77, 91, 94, 107.

6. Bacon, *Novum Organum* I.49, with I.65, 71, 80, 81, 87, 98, 117, 128; I.62, with I.65, 73, 89; I.91, with I.86, 90, 92, 93, 108, 110, 111.

7. Bacon, *New Atlantis* ¶¶ 48, 61, 68, with 39, 46, 60.

8. See Plato, *Republic* 509e–510a, 510e–511a.

9. The Hebrew *pesel/psilim* refers to statues of gods; Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 4:16, 25; 5:8; 27:15; Isaiah 40:19; 42:17; 44:9–20; 48:5; Jeremiah 14; Habakkuk 2:18.

10. In which he quotes Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 6.1–3, with emphasis on *recreaverunt*; see also 5.772–1104 passim, with I.56, I.629, 2.708, *et alibi*.

11. Martin D. Yaffe, "Anthropogenic Effects" in Genesis 1–11 and Francis Bacon, *Telos* 117 (2016): 16–42.

12. Or "fables"—the Latin *fabula*, like the Greek *mythos*, means both "story" and "story line."

13. For Bacon's polemic against Scholastic philosophy, see especially *Novum Organum* I.89, with I.62, 65, 68, 79, and II.52. See notes 18 and 19, below.

14. See Peter Urbach, *Francis Bacon's Philosophy of Science* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987), 97, 109–20, 125.

15. 2 Kings 5:13 (Hebrew).

16. Besides the native islanders, there were also *stirps* (family lines) of "Hebrews, Persians, and Indians," "Chaldeans," and "Arabians"; evidently none of these had to convert. See *New Atlantis* 49, 52, 65.

17. See section III, above.

18. Much of the *New Organon*, of course, is directed philosophically against devotees of Aristotle's "old" *Organon* (his six treatises on logic)—namely, Scholastic philosophers, who defer to the authority of theology while considering Aristotelian philosophy to be its "handmaid" (cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*

Theologiae 1.Q1.A5, with note 13, above) While reconstructing theology in the manner I have been indicating, the *New Organon* also engages in deconstructing Aristotle's distinctive terminology—notably, "syllogism" (especially *Novum Organum* I.13, 14, 24), "species" (I.16, 60, 66, 98), "power [*potentia*]" (I.1–3), and "act [*actus*]" (I.51, 103; II.2, 5).

19. Though Bacon does not mention Aristotle or anyone else here as belonging to "Plato's school" (though a later mention includes Proclus in "Plato's second school," *Novum Organum*, I.96), his attribution of three characteristically Aristotelian notions—"abstract forms," "final causes," "first causes"—to it suggests that the "school" he has in mind may include the (professedly Aristotelian) Scholastic philosophers. See also *Novum Organum* I.73, 89, with note 13, above.

20. Bacon mentions gunpowder, the nautical compass, and printing, along with silk, sugar, and paper.

21. Yaffe, "Anthropogenic Effects," 38.

22. See *Timaeus* 24e–25d; *Critias* 113a–121c.

23. See Martin D. Yaffe, *Shylock and the Jewish Question* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 111–17.

24. The merchant's name, Joabin, recalls the biblical Joab, King David's loyal, prudent, and ruthless adviser (see especially 2 Samuel 11:1–12:24, with 3:22–32; 10:8–12; 12:26–31; 14:1–20; 24:1–10; 1 Kings 1:5–49; 2:1–6). Joabin goes out of his way to show his (outwardly professed) accommodation as a Jew to Christian beliefs. His conversation with the narrator ends with his being "commanded away in haste" by "one that seemed to be a messenger." Joabin returns the next morning to tell of "word come to the governor of the city" that a Father of Salomon's House will be visiting the city "in state" the next week. Three days after the Father's elaborate parade, which the narrator describes in detail, Joabin returns again, having been "commanded" to say that the Father will meet the sailors to give them a blessing and that they must choose someone for a private conference with the Father. The narrative ends with the Father describing Salomon's House in detail to the narrator privately and giving him "leave to publish" their conversation "for the good of other nations" (see ¶¶ 65, 68–70, 71–83).

25. The governor “put[s] in execution by his public authority” the father’s “decrees and orders,” which, however, are seldom disobeyed, “such reverence and obedience they give to the order of nature.”
26. See Yaffe, *Shylock and the Jewish Question*, 115; Yaffe, “Anthropogenic Effects,” 40.
27. Plato, *Laws* 771e–772a; Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 103.
28. On this theme, see Robert Faulkner, *Francis Bacon and the Project of Progress* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), especially 272–78.

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CHAPTER 3

Leviathan's Reconquest of the Christian Person for the State

MARK SHIFFMAN

In his chapter “On Civil Religion” in *On the Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau asserts that when “Jesus came to establish a spiritual kingdom on earth,” this novelty “brought about the end of the unity of the State,” resulting in a “perpetual conflict of jurisdiction that has made any good polity impossible in Christian States.” He goes on to assert that “the philosopher Hobbes is the only one who correctly saw the evil and the remedy.”¹ In Rousseau’s judgment, the evil—namely, the “internal divisions” engendered by the introduction of such conflicting sources of authority and loyalty—is not only a problem of institutions and jurisdictions but also an anthropological and psychological problem: “Everything that destroys social unity is worthless. All institutions that put man in contradiction with himself are worthless.”² If Rousseau is right, the remedy administered by Hobbes, his attempted transformation of the Christian political animal into the subject of the modern sovereign state, cannot be adequately understood and assessed merely as a proposal for newly conceived and legitimated political institutions. To succeed, it must also function as a project of delegitimation of all dimensions of personhood recognized by classical Christian thought as transcending the sovereign state’s sphere of authority. This delegitimation requires what Eric Voegelin describes as the transformation of “the Christian *theologia supranaturalis*” into a new “*theologia civilis*.”³ We must first, then,

understand the constitutive dimensions of personhood belonging to the Christian political animal and institutionalized in Western Christian civilization and then examine how Hobbes refashions them to remain securely within the parameters of his projected civil religion.

THE POLITICAL ANIMAL AND CHRISTIAN PERSONHOOD

In Christian civilization, the person for whom political institutions must be formed is understood as one capable of communion with the Creator and thus capable of various forms of participation in the true order and reality that issues from and leads back to the Creator. In the West, the articulation of this participatory personhood is provided above all by Augustine, with some crucial refinements added especially in the High Middle Ages. What, then, is Christian personhood, and what is its political significance? To answer this question, we must begin from the classical understanding of the political animal as made manifest in the ancient polis and then consider the transformation of this understanding wrought by Christian anthropology.

The self-governing community of the classical polis opens a wide field of choice and action for human beings, as well as a field for argument about those choices and actions.⁴ We may therefore summarize the dimensions of humanity opened up by political life in terms of the kinds of freedom the polis makes available and visible, along with the amplitude of reason corresponding to these freedoms. Briefly, the polis makes possible five kinds of freedom, which may be viewed in a kind of ascending hierarchy: political, legal, moral, psychological, and philosophical.

The polis is characterized above all by the *political* freedom of active self-government. In a community of limited size, which governs itself and answers to no higher governing body, citizens are able to reflect in common on how best to conduct and order their lives together. Arguments must be made in commonly recognizable terms of what is just and beneficial—a demand that implies the availability of a common standard of practical rationality and wisdom and that makes manifest the full scope of that practical reason. Adjudication of these arguments requires shared recognition of established institutions with authority to determine and promulgate laws from which no one is exempt. There can be said to be *legal* freedom and rule of law to the extent that the operation of these institutions gives maximum sway to rational deliberation in common, in a way that effectively prevents

anyone's arbitrary will from dictating the laws. Legal freedom thus solidifies and safeguards political freedom.

This very condition of lawfulness, as a form of self-command that prioritizes the role of reason in determining what is commanded, cultivates *moral* freedom, or the human being's own self-command through the exercise of reason and virtue. As Plato lucidly expounds, such moral freedom, and the standard of human excellence it establishes, involves an ordering of the soul in which the spirited element attaches its sense of dignity to the image of the human being in whom rational recognition of the good governs choice and limits the appetites.⁵ The cultivation of practical wisdom, fostered by political, legal, and especially moral freedom, in its turn opens up the prospect of *psychological* freedom. Deliberative reason, finding itself in principle faced with the task of discerning the best among the conflicting judgments put forward in public conversation, sees the need for and discovers the possibility of freedom from the opinions that passionate attachment otherwise makes compelling. This psychological freedom from passionate opinion renders possible an orientation away from opinion toward knowledge of the truly good and thus opens up the prospect of *philosophical* freedom.

These freedoms, it must be noted, can coexist with the unlimited scope of the city's authority over the lives of its citizens, including over their speeches and actions regarding the gods, but as we ascend the scale of these kinds of freedom the tension between that unlimited authority and the freedom of the person increases. One of the constitutive challenges of ancient philosophy was to work out modes of coexistence between the authority of the city and the freedom of the philosophical soul, a challenge met in distinctively different ways by the various philosophical schools.

In terms of the structure of political life and political authority, the most momentous change brought about by Christian civilization is the public acknowledgment of a rightful and inherent limit of the authority of civil government. This limit derives from the citizen's prior belonging to a more authoritative and encompassing community, which Augustine calls the City of God. Because they share a fundamental relationship to the one Creator of the universe, Christians, while remaining members of different cities, recognize that they belong more fundamentally to a single community that transcends, morally and metaphysically, these bounds of civic identity. This defies the logic of pagan religion, in which the gods of one city or people vie for power with the gods of another through human

warfare. Augustine recognizes a sign of this historical novelty in the sack of Rome by the Visigoths, which occasions his *De civitate Dei*: an invading foreign army, because they professed Christianity, spared those who made the same profession and let them take sanctuary in churches.⁶ The bond of Christian communion, in this instance, supersedes the passions that drive political enemies to exercise the prerogatives of conquest to the utmost.

Communion with God, as the highest good and ultimate human happiness, reorients the five kinds of freedom given scope in the pagan city and, along with them, the shape of practical wisdom. In what does this communion consist? In the most general terms, it consists in loving God above all else and accepting the transformative consequences of that love operating in our souls and lives. The first condition of such love and acceptance is humility and receptivity to grace, and this is the Christian transformation of psychological freedom, freedom from the distorting passion of pride and the resistance it generates in us to receiving our beatitude from our Creator, who is the truth and the first principle of all truth as well as the highest good and the orderer of all goods.⁷ This psychological freedom is the foundation of Christian philosophical freedom, which rests fundamentally on recognizing the Creator as Creator and all created beings, including ourselves, as manifestations of the truth, goodness, and beauty of God, their source.⁸ The recognition of God as the highest good toward which our desires are ordered, and the reordering of all our desires in fidelity to the order of goods as they relate to God, results in the reordering of practical wisdom or prudence, which is expanded and reconfigured in accord with our capacity for communion and beatitude.⁹

As prudence expands to accommodate citizenship in the City of God, so does legal freedom. For the ancient citizen, practical reason's discernment of ordered goods is simply a perfection to be sought in fulfillment of our desire for excellence. For Christians, the precepts of natural law, which are practical reason's grounding principles, are part of our created nature, and thus expressions of the will of God for our moral, familial, and political self-governance. Thus they have the character of law, an authority binding upon all, and a priority over human laws such that human laws that contravene natural law lose authority.¹⁰ Aquinas calls natural law the rational creature's participation in the eternal law that is God's ordering reason. Conversely, human laws draw their legitimacy from their grounding in and service of the natural law and its imperatives to act for justice and the common good. Thus natural law is another, more complicated principle of limits on government, but one

whose authority in the soul and in the public sphere ultimately rests upon recognition of our status as creature and our participatory personhood.¹¹

The moral freedom that corresponds to this legal freedom is characterized by action in accord with conscience.¹² Conscience, which is the act of applying the principles of natural law to the judgment of actions, can be deformed by our sinfulness, our passions, and our rationalizations; it can be reformed by moral education and by the image of Christ present to us in the Scriptures and the mirror of the saints.¹³

This reformation of conscience enables us to participate in the transfigured political freedom of the City of God, to participate in the charitable will that issues forth from the ruler of that city and is continually and freely affirmed by the communion of saints—a participation described as sanctification. The path to sanctification in charity begins from the reformation in conscience and ongoing conversion from sin to Christ, taking shape as we discern our distinct vocation within the City of God and act in increasing fidelity to it. Insofar as this participation in the City of God requires our free and willing embrace of the laws of that city, it requires us to act as citizens engaged in the ongoing conversation of the faithful about how to attain the common good.¹⁴

Thus we have a distinct constellation of anthropological categories of the Christian person: humility, grace, natural law, conscience, conversion, communion, and sanctification. They are the activated potentialities of the Christian political animal, the dimensions of human fulfillment that transcend the purview of the earthly city by being grounded in participatory communion with the Creator of all. At the same time, they are related by analogy and extension to the anthropological dimensions revealed by earthly citizenship.

The transcendence of the scope of state authority articulated in these categories provides the inhabitants of the earthly polities of “Christendom” with a mutual awareness of their shared orienting point in God as highest good. In the institution of the church and the practice of prayer, they enact this communion that unites them, through Christ, beyond the purview of the civil order, and thereby are able to recognize one another as bearers, in principle, of a transcendent dignity. Within this institutional order and the understanding of the person and world embodied in it, the principle that the earthly government’s authority over human life is limited by principles inherent in an order that precedes that of the city comes to light as a more

or less self-evident axiom. Accordingly, the loss of such recognition of these dimensions of their humanity opened in communion with God and transcending the civil sphere should be expected to render the inherent limits of the scope of government considerably less self-evident. A “post-Christian” political condition, by shedding this anthropology of the Christian political animal, would thus be, almost automatically and unavoidably, a condition whose tendency is to reextend the scope of political authority. This reextension of authority is precisely the agenda of Hobbes’s account of human nature and the sovereign state in *Leviathan*.

CIVIL RELIGION VS. THE CITY OF GOD

Hobbes’s effort to dismantle, in principle, the institutional order of Christendom articulated by the “two cities” teaching appears most manifestly in part 3 of *Leviathan*, “Of a Christian Commonwealth.” Already in part 2, Hobbes justifies his ecclesiastical-political agenda on the basis of the danger of civil war that provides the constant refrain of the first two parts. In the spirit of Machiavelli’s scorn for “imaginary republics,” but with the added twist of his own physiological interpretation of imagination, Hobbes warns, “He that presumes to break the law upon his own or another’s pretended dream or vision, or upon other fancy of the power of invisible spirits than is permitted by the commonwealth . . . followeth the imagery of his own or another private man’s brain, . . . which if every private man have leave to do, . . . there could be no law made to hold, and so all commonwealth would be dissolved” (27.20).¹⁵ Given that the primary and paramount justification for the institution of sovereign authority is its function of maintaining order and peace (i.e., preventing civil war), it follows that the sovereign must gather authority over religious belief and practice back into the sphere of political authority, for “points of doctrine concerning the kingdom of God have so great influence on the kingdom of man, as not to be determined but by them that under God have sovereign power” (38.5). Thus it is necessary to discredit the institutional form claiming to give concrete earthly embodiment to the communion characteristic of the heavenly city—namely, the Catholic Church: “Temporal and spiritual government are but two words brought into the world to make men see double and mistake their lawful sovereign” (39.5).

Hobbes can, of course, rely on widespread sympathy with an attack on the Catholic Church in an England whose principal warring factions are

Anglicans and Calvinists. By the same token, he can count on a sympathetic hearing from Protestants for the first two chapters of part 3, in which he reduces the question "Of the Principles of Christian Politics" (32) to the interpretation of Scripture and reduces the question of the authority and interpretation of Scripture (33) to the question of whether "Christian kings and the sovereign assemblies in Christian commonwealths be absolute in their own territories, immediately under God, or subject to one vicar of Christ, constituted over the universal church" (33.25). According to Hobbes, this question "cannot be resolved without a more particular consideration of the Kingdom of God, from whence also we are to judge of the authority of interpreting the Scripture" (33.25).

The major outcome of all the critical and argumentative work of chapters 34–39 is that the Kingdom of God refers not to anything in which Christians have any real participation here and now but only to the commonwealth Christ promises to establish on earth when he returns. Hobbes asserts that, according to the original Christian teaching, "men were converted to no other thing than to the belief of that which the apostles preached; and the apostles preached nothing but that Jesus was the Christ, that is to say, the king that was to save them, and reign over them eternally in the world to come; and consequently, that he was not dead, but risen again from the dead, and gone up into heaven, and should come again one day to judge the world (which also should rise again to be judged), and reward every man according to his works" (42.34).

By the end of part 3, this insistence on the exclusively future existence of the Kingdom of God has become as persistent a refrain as the specter of civil war had become by the end of part 1 and throughout part 2. This rhetorical parallel is no accident, for it is precisely by recasting the Kingdom of God as an earthly kingdom on the same plane as the sovereign state, but displaced into the future, that Hobbes makes participation in that kingdom effectively irrelevant to the political status of the subject of the modern state. The two are mutually exclusive and cannot coexist. Since the entry ticket to that future kingdom consists of nothing other than believing it will eventually exist and acting in the meantime with justice (which is nothing other than obedience to the laws made by the sovereign authority), civil religion amounts to the promise that strict obedience to the positive law entails an additional future reward that the state is not responsible for supplying.

This discrediting of the idea of the Kingdom of God or heavenly city as an existing community in which humans participate in this life entails a drastic revision of our understanding of being human. Broadly considered, it entails the abandonment of a teleological understanding of human fulfillment, a well-known aspect of Hobbesian anthropology. Hobbes notoriously relativizes the notion of good and evil, asserting that “whatsoever is the object of any man’s appetite or desire that is it which he for his part calleth *good*; and the object of his hate and aversion, *evil*; and of his contempt, *vile* and *inconsiderable*. For these words of good, evil and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves” (6.7).

This repudiation of a natural standard of good implies also a rejection of any hierarchy of goods, so that “there is no such *finis ultimus* (utmost aim) nor *Summum Bonum* (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers” (11.1). The classical and Scholastic notion of the attainment of happiness as the fulfillment of human nature in active virtue loses all force and sense. We no longer understand our moral vocation in Augustinian terms as the conformation of our loves to the true order of goods, and thus as a continual transformation and rectification of the order of the soul.

RECONQUERING MORAL INTERIORITY

A more fully articulated account of the Hobbesian anthropological revolution, however, requires attention to the ways in which Hobbes reinterprets and thereby discredits the distinct dimensions of Christian personhood and freedom we earlier identified. The first aspect of the person Hobbes takes pains to discredit in part 3 is “spirit” as distinguished from body. For Hobbes, human lawfulness reduces to actions (which is to say bodily motions) that remain within the parameters laid down by civil law. “Spirit” then (aside from its popular usage referring to invisible bodies like the air) only indicates the inclination or tendency to act a certain way, which is to say the relative predictability of certain kinds of bodily motions in a human being (34.3–4). Hobbes’s evacuation of the language of spirit accords perfectly with his repudiation of naturally ordered goods and human teleology. As Pierre Manent notes, “It is the distance between his empirical, real being, and the end he pursues—justice, wisdom, truth—a distance that is recognized so

as to be eliminated, and yet always invincibly maintained by reason of the 'sinful' or simply 'intermediary' character of man, that opens a space where he can reflect on himself and recognize himself as man."¹⁶ Precisely in this self-aware inwardness the human being comes to recognize the extent and deficiency of his participation in the fullness of formation that constitutes his membership in the City of God. Thus to render "spirit" an empty notion is to deprive the human being of the language and prism for assessing his belonging to and participation in the dimension of being and communion that transcends the system of hedges that is the positive law.

With the human end reduced to the impetus to preserve one's life and protect it with sufficient power, the classical understanding of prudence and natural law reduces to a set of pragmatic counsels for preserving the capacity of one's body to continue in motion. Thus after spending two chapters speaking in the traditional idiom of "laws of nature," Hobbes admits that he has been equivocating: "These dictates of reason men used to call by the name of laws, but improperly; for they are but conclusions or theorems concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves" (15.41). The abandonment of law as an ordering to virtue and its reduction to a matter of boundaries to action is clearly indicated by Hobbes's summation of the whole law of nature in terms of a negative version of the Golden Rule: "Do not that to another, which thou wouldst not have done to thyself" (15.35). It is a question of keeping our hands off one another, rather than shaping our actions for sharing in the good with one another. The external action of the administrative state is quite competent to define and enforce law thus understood and requires no limitation of its purview with regard to natural law in the Hobbesian sense. Hobbes does grant that if we conceive of these dictates of reason as issuing from God, they can be considered laws, but as regards the effect on the limits of government, this leads him to a conclusion diametrically opposed to the traditional view: "The laws of God, therefore, are none but the laws of nature, whereof the principal is that we should not violate our faith, that is, a commandment to obey our civil sovereigns" (43.5).

This rhetorical undoing of traditional natural law entails a reduction of prudence to cleverness, from which Aristotle was at pains to distinguish it.¹⁷ Prudence, according to Hobbes, refers merely to the ability to project the outcome of a causal chain, so that when we call prudence a virtue we simply mean that someone is particularly adept at recognizing the means

conducting to an end (3.7 and 8.11). The end pursued by men is “principally their conservation, and sometimes their delectation only,” and these ends are easy to subsume under prudence understood as clever manipulation of the causal machine (13.3). Whereas the classical tradition of political philosophy recognized a role for prudent advisers in correcting or guiding the aims of princes, Hobbes makes it the primary qualification of a counselor “that his ends and interests be not inconsistent with the ends and interest of him he counselleth,” for the role of the counselor is nothing more than to exercise cleverness in finding means to the sovereign’s ends, beyond which there is no appeal, even by reason (25.11).¹⁸

The elimination of a natural order of goods not only dismantles the hierarchy of goods that establishes prudence as the complete unfolding of natural law; it also demands the delegitimation of conscience as the grounding of natural law and the source of the inward drama of the moral life. Hobbes identifies as a doctrine pernicious to the peace of mankind the teaching “that men shall judge of what is lawful and unlawful, not by the law itself, but by their own consciences (that is to say, by their own private judgments)” (30.14). Here Hobbes uses the word “conscience” sarcastically, alluding to the tendency of Protestants who are “vehemently in love with their own new opinions (though never so absurd) and obstinately bent to maintain them” to grant “their opinions also that revered name of conscience, as if they would have it seem unlawful to change or speak against them” (7.4). The remedy for the doctrine that men are answerable to their “private consciences, which are but private opinions,” is for every man instead to guide his actions only by the civil law, “the public conscience, by which he hath already undertaken to be guided” (29.7). It is only in the state of nature, where there is no law to measure our actions, that it is a sin to act against one’s own conscience—a tautology amounting to the observation that in the state of nature (i.e., in the absence of enforced laws) we have only our own reason to judge our actions by.

If, however, we use the word “conscience” to refer to a shared recognition of the standard of civil law as the rule of our actions and of the punishments that accompany its violation, we can more strictly align moral judgment with positive law. This is the meaning of conscience Hobbes promotes (27.30). According to this usage, we sin against conscience not only when we contravene the law but also when we intend and plan to do so (30.13). We do

not, however, violate conscience when we merely desire to break the law or fantasize about doing so:

To be delighted in the imagination only, of being possessed of another man's goods, servants, or wife, without any intention to take them from him by force or fraud, is no breach of the law, that saith, *Thou shalt not covet*: nor is the pleasure a man may have in imagining, or dreaming of the death of him, from whose life he expecteth nothing but damage, and displeasure, a sin; but the resolving to put some act in execution, that tendeth thereto. For to be pleased in the fiction of that, which would please a man if it were real, is a passion so adherent to the nature both of man, and every other living creature, as to make it a sin, were to make sin of being a man. The consideration of this, has made me think them too severe, both to themselves, and others, that maintain, that the first motions of the mind, (though checked with the fear of God) be sins. (27.1)¹⁹

This peculiar and hardly plausible interpretation of the commandment against coveting exhibits precisely the stifling of the inwardness of moral life that is Hobbes's consistent aim.

If conscience ceases to be understood as a participation of human reason in true apprehension of the good (which would require formation, examination, questioning, and discernment) and devolves into opinion, either idiosyncratic or derivative from another, then the question of rightly ordered conscience is no longer a question of truth but only of authority. According to Hobbes's version of natural law and his account of sovereign representation, only the sovereign can have "immediate authority from God, to teach and instruct the people" regarding what is just and unjust, and so only the sovereign can grant that teaching authority to others (23.6). This exclusive mediation of right moral doctrine, in the name of God, by the sovereign authority and its appointed ideologues limns in broad outline the distinctively modern form of the conflict between moral discernment and state propaganda, illustrated most starkly in totalitarian regimes forged in the twentieth century. The equivalence Hobbes seems to imply between freedom of conscience and the subjection of one's words and actions "to none but the civil power" represents an inversion and occlusion of the traditional

understanding of conscience as a principle of limitation upon government as well as a source of legitimacy of ruling authority (47.19).

RECONQUERING CHRISTIAN COMMUNION

The anthropological categories of natural law, prudence, and conscience, though requiring rectification by the guidance of revelation, are nonetheless understood in the Christian tradition as natural (albeit imperfect) participations in the eternal law that is divine reason. The categories belonging more distinctly to Christian faith—humility, grace, conversion, vocation, and sanctification—would seem more difficult to deprive of their inwardness, but this, too, is necessary to Hobbes's project of articulating a civil religion that confines the moral person entirely within the purview of sovereign power. Here again, the discrediting of any noncorporeal sense of the human person serves to undermine the relevant sense of communion constitutive of membership in the City of God. In the Catholic tradition, to be animated by the Holy Spirit is to participate in the activity of love that is God, and to share in this participation with the saints and on the basis of their modeling and mirroring of Christ's love is to become one with them as a community of the faithful, living and dead. Hobbes must divert the metaphysical sense of this communion into the stream of a purely moral, behavioral sense—for example, by insisting that reference to "the Spirit of God" as present in someone means no more than the "inclination to godliness and God's service" (34.3). Hobbes's ridicule of the notion of "incorporeal substance" and of traditional teachings about heaven, hell, and purgatory serves to undermine the moral imagination that thrives on a sense of communion between the living and the dead in a community that joins them to God as the "body of Christ," a communion that transcends the scope of earthly sovereignty.

Humility is classically understood in the Christian tradition as an attitude of receptivity to God's spirit, preparing one to be drawn into this communion of the faithful fellow-citizens of the heavenly city animated by the divine will. Hobbes redefines humility in terms of the primary goal of sovereign power, the prevention of discord. As the contrary of pride, humility consists in acknowledging our fellow subjects as our equals, so as to forestall contention over "who is the better man." The specific rationale Hobbes provides for this ninth law of nature is a telling instance of the reduction of truth to ideology: "If nature therefore has made men equal,

that equality is to be acknowledged; or if nature have made men unequal, yet because men that think themselves equal will not enter into conditions of peace but upon equal terms, such equality must be admitted" (15.21). Hobbes's doctrine of sovereignty, in other words, if it is in practice to unite the wills of subjects, relies upon their public acknowledgment of the principle of equality, regardless of their private belief in the content of that principle (or even whether it possesses any content). In both the classical understanding and in the Hobbesian revision, humility serves as the threshold of willing entry into political community, but whereas for the Christian tradition humility serves as the entry into soul-transforming communion in the City of God, for Hobbes it serves as the superficial profession of politically correct conformity underwriting the side-by-side earthly coexistence of individualists.

The purely external relations of these individualists, which it is the task of the administrative state to manage, dictate that their interactions be characterized by covenant or contract—which is to say the economic exchange of mutually exclusive powers over things. Grace, then, rather than the manifestation of divine gratuity inviting human beings into greater communion, becomes a particular mode of exchange. In the human sphere, "grace" is the transfer of the right to a thing without demanding anything in return, in the hope of some kind of gain not stipulated in the transfer (14.12). In the case of what are called gifts of the Holy Spirit, God grants powers to those he favors, and these granted powers (which are not granted as such, but rather cultivated from "given" natural dispositions) are called graces (24.25, 26.13). Otherwise, when Hobbes speaks of divine grace, he refers to the fact that God grants admission to his kingdom (or "the power to be subjects") to those willing to acknowledge Christ's future kingship, though God is under no obligation to do so (14.17, 35.13, 41.4). Even this grant, however, is premised upon a contractual relationship: "God Almighty having promised Paradise to those men . . . that can walk through this world according to the precepts and limits prescribed by him" (14.17). The legalistic moralism of action confined within dictated parameters becomes the substance of Christian membership, which consists of occupying a place by contracted right, whereas in the classical Christian tradition moral action was rather the sign of the soul's conformation to Christ through growing love and communion. For Augustine, it is a shared love that unites Christians in the City of God; for Hobbes, those who "believe there is a God that governeth the

world, and hath given precepts, and propounded rewards and punishments to mankind, are God's subjects."²⁰

Conversion, accordingly, does not pertain to the transformation of one's loves leading to greater communion with God and the faithful, but it only pertains to the actions one performs and the beliefs one professes. The purpose of the Scriptures is "to convert men to the obedience of God" and to belief in Christ's future kingdom, to which such obedience gains them admission (28.20, 42.34). Worship, according to Hobbes, is a matter not of the interior person and communion with God but rather of "external signs appearing in the words and actions of men" of their opinion of God's power and goodness, and the "amendment of life" that he equates with conversion is the adoption of such a regimen of words and actions signaling one's belief in the future kingdom and the terms of admission to it (31.8, 44.4). Hobbes almost never refers to the love of neighbor, which all four Gospels propose as the challenging standard of conversion of the heart, and when he does, it is only to reduce that love to the same negative observation of boundaries for our actions that characterizes his revised version of the Golden Rule (30.13, 43.4). His only mention of the Pharisees, representative in the Gospels of empty and outward legalism, is his citation of Jesus's injunction to the crowds and his disciples to obey them since they sit in the seat of Moses (i.e., the office of sovereign authority); he neglects the subsequent verses warning against taking them as models of practice (43.2; cf. Matthew 23:1-7).

This emphasis on outward obedience and respect for boundaries determines as well the sense Hobbes gives to "vocation" and "sanctification." Traditionally, vocation is understood as a "call of God" indicating the form of service in which a person most fitly fulfills his or her potential as a member of the City of God. Finding the way to one's vocation requires discernment of the promptings of love and conscience, and while it may very well require counsel from those who know one's character and talents, this counsel is secondary to one's attempt to discern God's will through a prayerful listening for God's promptings. Hobbes uses "vocation" and "calling" to refer specifically to the offices of prophet and missionary, and in both cases the terms refer to a form of commissioning for the work in question, but Hobbes maintains a studied ambiguity as to whether the commission is to be understood as coming from God or from the human community (36.7-8, 13; 42.12-14).

"Sanctification" undergoes an even more radical externalization. Traditionally, in reference to human beings, it refers to the process by which

one becomes more conformed in soul to the saints as mirrors of Christ. According to Hobbes, "to sanctify" means "to make holy," and that is the holy that is "set apart from common use" and reserved for uses that enable one to describe it as God's property, "which implies no new quality in the place or image, but only a new relation by appropriation to God" (45.23). Degrees of holiness are merely degrees to which something is exclusively set apart for special service to God (35.18). According to Hobbes, when it is applied to human beings, "sanctification" is equivalent to being possessed of the assurance of membership in the future Kingdom of God (35.1). One is, in a sense, promised to God as his future subject and possessed of the "earnest" of the property right of future membership.

With these dimensions of personhood emptied of all interiority and reinterpreted in reference to membership rights in a future earthly kingdom, one that we earn by absolute obedience to our present sovereign power, the pathway to cultivating the conformation of the soul to Christ that is the communion of the City of God is stifled from the outset. Deprived of this prospect of cultivation of the soul, the human being is deprived of transcendent dignity. The "dignity" of a man refers to nothing other than "the value set on him by the commonwealth" (10.18).

The very fact that Hobbes has to theorize the reextension of modern state authority in the wake of Christianity's expansion of the dimensions of personhood beyond the purview of that authority requires that he reconquer Christian personhood by redefining every aspect of it into its opposite. The individual subject of the modern state, who relates only externally to the world and others through the medium of bodily motions, is by that token not a participant in any greater fullness of being, is not ordered to a communion that requires conversion, humility, and grace and that would be fulfilled in sanctification. To the extent, however, that these dimensions of personhood and the dignity they reveal remain at all accessible and compelling, the modern state faces a twofold challenge: to regulate the motions of our bodies in a way that keeps us from being a nuisance to one another, and to provide some substitute for these dimensions of freedom, enabling us to feel free while constraining and confining us. If the drama of the modern state revolves around its capacity to produce convincing counterfeits of freedom by following the Hobbesian playbook of evacuation by reinterpretation, one may well wonder whether such a project can be sustainable, and if not, how near we may be to its denouement.

NOTES

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 126–27.
2. Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 128.
3. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 155–56.
4. For an elaboration of this phenomenon, see Pierre Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City*, trans. Marc LePain (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 3.
5. Plato, *Republic* 435b–444e.
6. Augustine, *The City of God* 1.1–2, 7 (trans. Marcus Dods [New York: Modern Library, 2000]).
7. Augustine, *City of God* 1.preface.
8. See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy* 1.1–3, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colin Luibhéid and Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).
9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1–2. Q5.A3 (<http://www.newadvent.org/summa>).
10. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1–2.Q91.A2, Q94.A4, Q96.A4.
11. See Richard Sorabji, *Moral Conscience Through the Ages: Fifth Century BCE to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 62–66; Sorabji entirely ignores this participatory aspect of Aquinas's account.
12. For a lucid analysis of conscience as a distinctly Christian category, though one indebted to indications in the Hebrew prophets, see Rémi Brague, “Jew, Greek, and Christian: Some Reflections on the Pauline Revolution,” *Expositions* 1, no. 1 (2007): 16–28.
13. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.Q79.A12–13.
14. On the obligation to engage in such conversation, see Augustine, *City of God* 1.9 (trans. Dods, 11–13).
15. References to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* are to the edition by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), citing chapter and section numbers.
16. Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 136.
17. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.12, 1144a22–36.
18. Of course the end of preserving secure order and effective sovereign authority is assumed, so that a counselor might warn a sovereign when his actions threaten this end constitutive of his office.
19. On the consequences for modern moral and political thought of this nullification of the consciousness of sin, see Mark Shiffman, “Political Life and the Horizon of the Human: Polis, Church and State, and Totalitarianism,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 43, no. 4 (2016): 608–11.
20. Augustine, *City of God* 14.28; Hobbes, *Leviathan* 31.2.

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Will Wonders Never Cease?

Spinoza's Critique of Miracles

STEVEN FRANKEL

In chapter 6 of *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*), Baruch Spinoza offers a powerful critique of miracles that appears to refute their possibility once and for all on both metaphysical and scriptural grounds. This critique, which Spinoza describes as “serving the intent of this whole work in no small way,” allows him to establish a central premise of the *TTP*—namely, the separation of religion and philosophy.¹ The interpretation of Scripture to which he turns in the chapters immediately following the refutation of miracles can then proceed in terms fully comprehensible to any reasonable person without recourse to mysteries or supernatural knowledge. This account of Scripture allows him to draw a sharp distinction between the domains of religion and reason in such a way as to allow both freedom and independence—the central goal of the work.

In addition to contributing to the work's political conclusions, the analysis of miracles promises to clarify Spinoza's theological claims. This is because his treatment of miracles is clearer than his ambiguous claims about prophecy—for example, where Spinoza appears to obscure the question of whether Moses and Jesus possessed extraordinary or even supernatural abilities.² In chapter 6, however, such exceptions are categorically rejected in favor of the view that philosophy is the ultimate arbiter of nature and even the Bible.

Unfortunately, Spinoza's critique of miracles has been vexed by controversy that began almost immediately after its publication. According to Jonathan Israel, "No other element of Spinoza's philosophy provoked as much consternation and outrage in his own time as the sweeping denial of miracles and the supernatural."³ Although outrage has declined over the past three centuries, contemporary scholars, too, have questioned the strength and coherence of Spinoza's critique and struggled to explain how it advances the theological and political claims of the work. According to G. H. R. Parkinson, one problem with Spinoza's critique of miracles is that it provides at least two incompatible definitions of the concept of a miracle: one focuses on the historical and biblical sense, while the other addresses the metaphysical and scientific claims. Parkinson further argues that Spinoza's metaphysical critique of miracles presumes that "the laws of nature are logically necessary truths, and that it is logically impossible that there should be an event that cannot be brought under some law or laws of nature." These claims are merely asserted rather than proven in the *TTP*, and to make matters worse, these claims "have been widely rejected since Hume and Kant attacked them."⁴ Parkinson suggests that contemporary scholars would do better to focus on another more modest critique, proposed by Spinoza and developed by David Hume, that focuses on the epistemological question of how to determine if a miracle has occurred. Shifting the burden of proof to the believer in miracles makes it more difficult to affirm the veracity of such claims and helps avoid the questionable metaphysical assertions that follow from those claims.

In response to Parkinson, Edwin Curley argues that Spinoza's metaphysical assertions, particularly his account of the laws of nature as necessary, universal, and fully determined, are elaborated in the *Ethics*. Read in conjunction with Spinoza's metaphysics, the critique of miracles in chapter 6 offers a stronger and even more plausible way to refute the possibility of miracles than Hume's epistemic argument.⁵ Curley concedes, however, that Spinoza obscures his argument out of deference to his audience; specifically, Spinoza supplements his critique with an argument derived from Scripture, which Curley refers to as an *argumentum ad orthodoxum*.⁶ The attempt to appeal to believers and, at the same time, undermine the fundamental tenets of their faith appears to be hopelessly contradictory. Curley argues that the religious and metaphysical arguments are nonetheless related: the critique of miracles is intended to trap the orthodox into rejecting the belief in miracles.

Curley writes that “the fundamental challenge Spinoza’s critique of miracles poses to the orthodox believer is to advance a conception of miracles which will allow them to have religious significance without leading either to the conclusion that miracles do not occur or that the power of God is limited in some way by the power of nature.”⁷ Spinoza means to show that miracles are incompatible with both science and the Bible yet still retain their power for the believer in revelation. Not surprisingly, Spinoza’s readers have rarely, if ever, managed to maintain such a paradoxical position. Curley admits, “So far as I am aware, no one has tried.”⁸ Spinoza’s critique of miracles must be judged a failure, since, despite its attempt to appeal to orthodoxy, he has failed to show how miracles can be made consistent with faith or science.

Does Spinoza’s attempt to appeal to believers and philosophers doom his argument to incoherence? Several scholars, including Harry Wolfson, have claimed just that. Wolfson argues that Spinoza was too timid to openly confront biblical religion and chose instead to present the teachings of religion as if they were in harmony with the teachings of science and philosophy: “Made of sterner stuff and living a few centuries later, Spinoza would have perhaps demanded the overthrow of the old order with its effete institutions so as to build upon its ruins a new society. . . . But being what he was and living at a time when belief in the potency of reformation had not yet been shaken by doubt, he chose to follow in the footsteps of rationalizers throughout history. The story of this rationalization is the story of his *Tractatus*.”⁹ Following Wolfson, Carlos Fraenkel suggests that Spinoza’s efforts to harmonize the claims of religion and philosophy by interpreting the Bible so that it is consistent with science, or at least with Spinoza’s fully determined account of nature, break down in the case of miracles.¹⁰ Although some scriptural examples of miracles can be reinterpreted and explained as unusual natural events, others, such as the resurrection of the dead, are more difficult to interpret poetically.¹¹ Further, Spinoza initiates a critique of religion that culminates in the complete separation of philosophy and religion on the grounds that the Bible contains little or no philosophical content. To support this view, he argues that the biblical account of miracles reflects the ignorance of the multitude, an ignorance shared by the prophets, who did not grasp the fixed and permanent causal order in nature.¹²

Like Wolfson, Fraenkel suggests that the contradiction between the rationalization of Scripture and the rejection of Scripture as inconsistent with modern science can be explained in terms of the development of

Spinoza's thought: initially, Spinoza was sympathetic to the harmonization of reason and revelation for the sake of social and political stability. Later, however, he seems to have changed his mind and embraced a more radical critique of religion in order to promote the freedom to philosophize. The *TTP* contains both arguments and, as a result, is ultimately incoherent. Fraenkel concedes, "I'm not sure that I can fully explain what led to Spinoza's change of heart with respect to dogmatism [the view that revelation can be made consistent with reason]."¹³ Nor can Fraenkel explain why Spinoza, after revising his opinion, would deliberately leave such an obvious and critical contradiction at the heart of his work.¹⁴

To these considerable problems, we may add another, perhaps greater problem with the account of miracles. Spinoza's account of Christianity's rejection of miracles appears to justify a considerable confidence in reason to transform politics. The suggestions that intellectual progress is possible, that reason can be harmonized with revelation, that society can be purged of superstition, and that philosophy can rule are at odds with his account of the permanence of superstition, the tyranny of the imagination, and the despair that Spinoza confesses to holding about the passionate nature of the multitude (*TTP* 4.46).¹⁵ He writes, "Those who have but experienced the varied mental cast of the multitude almost daily despair over it, since it is not governed by reason but by emotions alone, is brusque toward everything, and is very easily corrupted by either greed or luxury."¹⁶ In other words, his critique of miracles appears to contradict his consistently sober—not to say pessimistic—account of human nature.

The purpose of this essay is to explain Spinoza's critique of miracles in light of these criticisms and to rescue it from the charge of incoherence. To do so, we need to examine the theological and metaphysical critiques of miracles in chapter 6 of the *TTP*. As we shall see, these arguments are more closely related than appears at first glance. By focusing his critique on the concept of providence contained in the scriptural concept of miracles, Spinoza suggests that the theological-political problem cannot be resolved by harmonizing the teachings of reason and revelation. The critique of miracles involves a more elaborate strategy of neutralizing harmful, destabilizing superstitions, on the one hand, and moderating the ambitions of philosophers, on the other. Spinoza produces new superstitions, including the belief in progress, to shift the burden of proof for religious claims such as miracles and thus transfer authority from theologians to scientists. However,

Spinoza does not merely hand over authority to philosophers and hope for the best; rather, he prepares them with a new political science that tempers their ambitions.

MIRACLES AND SUPERSTITION

Spinoza's account of miracles, like the *TTP* itself, begins with the problem of superstition. However, chapter 6 shifts the focus from the ill effects of superstition to their structure and content. He claims that the fundamental belief that undergirds the belief in miracles is the separation of God and nature as separate powers. This view further supposes that the power of nature is limited and subject to God's superior power. Nature itself reveals little about God; rather, God's true power and nature's corresponding limits are disclosed only when God miraculously intervenes in nature. The example par excellence of this view is the creation story in Genesis according to which God creates the world out of preexisting matter.¹⁷

According to Spinoza, this understanding of nature emerged with "the first Jews," who were "completely ignorant of the principles of natural things" (*TTP* 6.67, 84). Spinoza views Judaism as codifying this belief and reports that his coreligionists continue to "imagine two powers, numerically distinct from one another, viz. the power of God and the power of natural things, which nevertheless has been determined by God in a certain way or (as most rather think these days) has been created by God" (*TTP* 6.67). The political importance of miracles is that they are not random or haphazard but providential—that is, they occur on behalf of particular individuals or nations. God's providence is clear to pious individuals and to pious nations.¹⁸

Yet this view of providence is hardly the last word. Spinoza argues that, when read carefully, the Hebrew Bible suggests that miracles have little to teach us about the world. For example, despite having witnessed God's miracles first hand, the Israelites and the prophets did not acquire a clear or consistent knowledge of God. Moses recognized this ignorance and warned the Israelites about the miracles of false prophets such as the Egyptian magicians.¹⁹ Similarly, Spinoza cites the worship of the golden calf as evidence that the Israelites, despite having witnessed signs and wonders in the desert, grossly misunderstood the nature of God and providence (*TTP* 2.27).²⁰ He concludes that the biblical reports of miracles were not meant by the biblical authors to teach a particular doctrine of providence but only to

convey the spirit of piety by omitting intermediate causes and referring to natural events as emanating directly from God. Reports of miracles reflect the political calculations of the Bible's authors who wished to "impress devotion on the hearts of the multitude" even at the expense of obscuring the true causes of things. These writers were not particularly concerned to make explicit the circumstances surrounding purported miracles and shape the narrative accordingly (*TTP* 6.75). Careful reading can help us reconstruct what really happened. For example, when Moses miraculously parted the Red Sea, the text implies that the event was caused by a strong wind, a detail that is muted in order to make it appear providential and miraculous (*TTP* 6.75–76).²¹ In those instances where the Bible does give a fuller account of the circumstances, it is easy to see that miracles are merely extraordinary natural events.²²

The problem with the Jewish view is not the absence of piety or even a defect in the political judgment of their leaders, such as Moses.²³ Rather, the Hebrews allowed their political goals to shape their theology and understanding of nature. As a result of their ignorance of nature and theology, the Hebrews confused philosophy and politics. This confusion led ultimately to the destruction of their state (*TTP* 17.208–9, 18.214–15). From a theological and Christian point of view, the Jews sacrificed the pursuit of salvation to politics. They continue to imagine that some individuals and nations are "more cherished by God than the rest, and [are] the final cause on account of which God has created, and continually directs all things" (*TTP* 6.68). Miracles support the view of providence by showing that God has taken special care of particular nations such as his chosen people while neglecting other nations. According to Spinoza, the Gospels expose this teaching as false and restore the proper relation of theology to politics (see *TTP* 5.61).²⁴

MIRACLES AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

In contrast to the beliefs of the primitive Israelites, Spinoza presents Christianity as consistent with the teachings of philosophy, science, and theology. In chapter 4 of the *TTP*, Spinoza portrays Jesus and his disciples as philosophers who knew the true causes of natural events, and he equates Jesus's teaching with the true, divine law. He reiterates this claim in chapter 6 where he contrasts the prophets, who presented obscure miracles as evidence for the existence of their providential God, with "Philosophy alone," which has

always maintained a clear concept of God's providence based on a view of nature as a fixed and unchangeable order (*TTP* 6.73–74). The defining feature of philosophy appears to be a universal concept of God's providence. The divine law taught by Jesus and the philosophers share this teaching about providence and therewith the path to blessedness and salvation.

It is worth emphasizing Spinoza's extraordinary claim that philosophers possess a single, clear position on providence. But what is that position? Spinoza initially says only that philosophers "endeavor to understand things not from miracles, but from clear concepts" and that they fashion their understanding of providence from their grasp of the universal laws of nature rather than their imaginings (*TTP* 6.73).²⁵ The agreement between philosophy and Christianity appears to be limited to the rejection of the Jewish doctrine of providence whereby one nation believes that they are "dearer to God than the rest" (*TTP* 6.82). The Pharisees codified this belief in particular providence with their doctrine of divine election. The miracles of the Hebrew Bible are said to prove that God controls nature "only for their convenience" (*TTP* 6.82). In opposition to the "ignorance of the Pharisees," Jesus "was sent to teach, not only the Jews, but the whole human race" the proper concept of providence, which is that "God cares equally for all" (see *TTP* 5.71, 4.64, 6.88).²⁶ The Gospels intended to correct the erroneous view of providence; unfortunately, their teachings are sometimes obscured by the need to appeal to their ignorant audience. Paul, for instance, had to accommodate his teachings, and even invoke miracles, to convert Jews and Greeks (1 Corinthians 9:20–22; cf. *TTP* 6.89). The other apostles, too, resorted to miracles not because they intended "to teach matters through natural causes but only to narrate those matters that broadly occupy the imagination and this in a method and style which better serve for admiring the matters more and consequently, for impressing devotion in the psyches of the vulgar" (*TTP* 6.75). In order to understand the true teachings of Scripture, theologians must be made aware of this tendency to adopt temporarily the belief in miracles or particular providence, lest they confuse Christianity with a "poetic style" aimed at impressing the Hebrews and other superstitious peoples (*TTP* 6.75). Unlike the Pharisees, whose view of nature and providence was shaped by political goals, the more philosophical apostles began with knowledge of nature and providence and made political accommodations as necessary.²⁷ In this same spirit, Spinoza suggests that as our knowledge of nature increases, our interpretation of Scripture should likewise advance.

As long as the central teaching of Christianity, universal providence, is not compromised, such changes do not affect the teachings of revelation.²⁸

Spinoza goes on to emphasize the importance of universal providence by describing it as the cornerstone of faith and ensconcing it in his universal or Catholic religion, whose essential dogmas are taught throughout Scripture.²⁹ These dogmas present the image of an omnipresent deity who loves humanity and forgives their sins.³⁰ Salvation, too, is a matter of imitating God's providence and practicing *caritas*. Spinoza calls on all decent men (*honestos*), including presumably philosophers, to embrace the dogmas. These dogmas have been obscured partly by residual Jewish chauvinism and also by ambitious Christian theologians, who are so absorbed in their competition for power or the special grace of God that they ignore the teaching on providence. Such competition has torn Christianity asunder with "great quarrels, envy, and hate" (*TTP*, preface.8). Spinoza suggests that the restoration of universal providence is the most urgent theological and political task facing the church.

MIRACLES AND THE BELIEF IN PROGRESS

Spinoza presents Christianity as a monumental victory of reason over superstition. The widespread dissemination of Christianity supports humanity's confidence in the possibility of intellectual progress and suggests that such progress has divine support. The critique of miracles makes an essential contribution to this progress by teaching believers how to avoid superstition and embrace the essential teaching of revelation, universal providence. It also points to the belief that philosophy and faith, while not perhaps entirely compatible, are hardly at odds with each other. The fact that men are reasonable enough to recognize the truth as taught by philosophy and embodied in Christianity allows Spinoza to build a case for freedom of thought and speech and direct his political project toward ever-greater enlightenment. In contrast to the primitive view motivated by a doctrine of exclusive providence and "a longing to oppose those who cultivate the natural sciences," the Christian view embraces universal providence and science (*TTP* 6.67).

The story of intellectual progress provides the basis for the second critique of miracles, which shifts the responsibility for ensuring the veracity of a miracle from the testimony of a superstitious witness to the scientist who knows the laws of nature. To prove a miracle has occurred, the believer

must show that a specific event is not “the result of many causes running together” rather than merely a generalization based on their limited experience of nature (*TTP* 6.68). That pious believers rarely have an education in science or natural philosophy is not a problem, since, as we have already seen, Scripture supports the belief in the open-ended progress of science. This explains why Spinoza’s critique of miracles is primarily scriptural, not scientific—that is, it is an argument from authority rather than a scientific account of nature. Without being able to provide an exhaustive account of the laws of nature, the multitude cannot know whether an event is a miracle or whether it contravenes those laws.³¹ They must present their claims to scientists to grasp the meaning of extraordinary events. The belief in progress predisposes the multitude toward science without necessarily making them more rational.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW OF PROVIDENCE

Spinoza’s critique of miracles is aimed at directing a superstitious audience—that is, an audience of individuals who tend to project “their own preconceived opinions” onto events so that “they perceive something other than what they saw or heard happening, especially if the thing being dealt with surpasses the grasp of the one narrating or hearing it, and above all, if it relates to his interest for it to happen in a certain mode” (*TTP* 6.77).³² For those individuals who wish to understand the “plain facts” or the world without illusions, Spinoza provides guidance, albeit in a highly condensed, even opaque, discussion. His philosophical critique adopts the theological vocabulary of his contemporaries, beginning with the “will of God,” a phrase that is not intended to suggest a changing volition or even willfulness (*TTP* 6.69).³³ Rather, Spinoza uses the term as a synonym for the intellect or the “mind of God,” which is reflected in the fully determined course of nature: “The virtue and power of nature are the very virtue and power of God” (*TTP* 6.69). As Walter Soffer notes, God’s intellect refers to “the nature and necessity inherent in Creation’s immanent eternal truths.”³⁴ Spinoza refers explicitly to such truths even in the *TTP*, for example, where he remarks, “God understands the nature of a triangle” means that “He has from eternity decreed that three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles” (*TTP* 6.63).³⁵ In other words, the laws of nature are “absolutely necessary truths which follow from the nature or definition of the things they apply to.”³⁶

Just as the will of God is unchanging, the laws of nature that express that will also “keep a fixed and unchangeable order” (*TTP* 6.69, 80).³⁷ Because of the regularity of this order and the fact that all events have prior natural causes, the order of nature can be understood or “investigated by human understanding” (*TTP* 7.85).

Any theological notion that presents God as a being who changes his mind or his will is “ridiculous,” not only because of its flagrant anthropomorphism but also because it undermines the permanence and truth of nature’s laws and suggests that “God created a nature so impotent and established such sterile laws and rules for it that he is often compelled to reinforce it anew if he wants it to be preserved” (*TTP* 6.69). At first glance, this philosophical critique appears to be consistent with Christianity. Indeed, the philosophical argument appears to strengthen our belief in an omnipotent God, particularly his infinite power through the eternal and regular laws of nature.³⁸ Miracles, on the other hand, leave us without any explanation of an event and weaken our faith by suggesting that God’s power does not work continuously in nature. Ultimately, miracles cannot explain anything at all; rather, they are a “failed attempt at explanation passing itself off as an explanation.”³⁹ They reflect our ignorance of the laws of nature or ignorance of the particular circumstances surrounding the event.⁴⁰

However, if we shift our focus from miracles to the broader issue of providence, it becomes clear that the philosophical view cannot be reconciled or harmonized with the biblical view. The claim that God cares equally for all cannot be harmonized with the view that the laws of nature are indifferent or hostile to the aspirations for justice and human flourishing.⁴¹ Spinoza goes further, suggesting that our perception of advantage or the good must be disregarded if we wish to understand the order of nature. Things that look evil or harmful are not so from the perspective of God.

Whenever, then, anything in nature seems to us ridiculous, absurd, or evil, it is because we have but a partial knowledge of things and are in the main ignorant of the order and coherence of nature as a whole, and because we want everything to be arranged according to the dictate of our own reason; although, in fact, what our reason pronounces bad is not bad as regards the order and laws of universal nature, but only as regards the laws of our own nature taken separately.⁴² From our limited perspective, things appear good or evil, foolish or wise, but such distinctions have little meaning in a universe indifferent to our own sense of well-being. To describe God as

“caring” or concerned with the behavior of individuals betrays an ignorance of the determined and necessary laws of nature.

The problem of superstition cannot be solved ultimately by harmonizing philosophy with Christianity. Does Spinoza mean to suggest that philosophers should play no role in the reformation of religious belief? This appears to be the case in the *TTP*, which presents several examples of the damage to politics and philosophy as a result of efforts by skeptics and students of philosophy. His non-Christian examples are particularly revealing. Spinoza considers the life of Alexander the Great, a figure often portrayed as the embodiment of the philosopher-king.⁴³ In Spinoza’s unflattering account, however, Alexander uses his knowledge of nature to bolster his own power rather than enlighten his subjects. He knows that solar eclipses are perfectly natural events but pretends otherwise in order to convince his subjects of his divinity.⁴⁴ Nor is Alexander completely rational. He is surrounded by priests who continually urge him to embrace various superstitions. Although he resists when things are going well, his rationality fails him when he faces grave misfortune; ultimately, he succumbs to superstition. Alexander’s failure suggests that it is foolish to rely on rulers who appear to be friendly toward philosophy, since they are constantly harassed by priests and religious figures.

The Ottoman Empire hardly increases our confidence in the rationality of statesmen. To the contrary, even though the empire was more successful than Alexander in using superstition to inculcate obedience in its citizens, its leaders, too, succumbed eventually to superstition. Spinoza’s assessment of the Turks is more favorable in one respect, however. The Turkish leaders solved the problem of competing with the priests for power by unifying the state with religion so as to achieve control over the latter. However, once they discovered and harnessed the power of superstition, they viewed philosophy as an enemy that threatened the stability of the state. It was not long before they used their considerable political power to suppress philosophy altogether: “The Turks consider it an impropriety even to dispute [matters of religion], and occupy each’s (*uniuscuius*) judgment with so many prejudices that they leave no place in the mind for sound reason or for doubting anything” (*TTP*, preface.17). Yet even here, Spinoza observes, superstition can be a lasting source of political stability: “No dominion has stood so long without any notable change as that of the Turks.” The failure of Alexander suggests that even leaders sympathetic to reason and philosophy cannot

always resist the power of superstition, either using it against their subjects or succumbing to it themselves (*TTP*, preface. 16–17).⁴⁵ The Turkish example shows that superstition can nonetheless be a potent tool for security and stability when combined with political power. One can imagine rulers who are more rational than these examples and make the case that philosophy should have a central role in political life.

In anticipation of such a response, Spinoza considers the example of Moses Maimonides, a figure devoted to philosophy yet also respected as an authority in his community (see *TTP* 7.115). From this unique position, Maimonides attempted to reform religion and present it as a repository of reason by creating a hermeneutical method that seamlessly unites the teachings of Scripture and philosophy: “[Maimonides] felt that each passage in Scripture admits various, indeed contrary, meanings; and that we could never be certain of the truth of any until we knew that that passage, as we interpret it, contained nothing that does not agree with reason or that conflicts with it. For if it is found to conflict with reason in its literal meaning, however clear it might seem, he still judges that the passage is to be interpreted otherwise” (*TTP* 7.97). Maimonides suggests that reason and revelation present equally compelling and consistent sources of knowledge; in reality, he cleverly elevates the authority of philosophy by insisting that Scripture’s metaphorical surface be interpreted to conform to the claims of philosophy. In this way, Maimonides makes reason the source of political and religious authority and appears to solve the problem of superstition among both rulers and subjects.

The problem with Maimonides’s elegant strategy is that it fatally underestimates the multitude’s resistance to reason: “If [Maimonides’s] teaching were true, it would follow that the vulgar, who are for the most part ignorant of demonstrations or are unable to have the leisure for them, will not be able to admit anything about Scripture except on the authority and attestations of those who philosophize; and, consequently, they will have to suppose that Philosophers cannot err about Scripture’s interpretation: surely this would be a new Church authority and a new kind of priests or Pontiffs, which the vulgar would ridicule rather than venerate” (*TTP* 7.99).

Maimonides’s strategy requires that the multitude gradually become more receptive to reason, but the possibility of gradual enlightenment is an illusion.⁴⁶ Spinoza reports that the Jewish community rejected the position that “Scripture should be accommodated to reason” and embraced the

contrary view “that reason should be the handmaid of Scripture and should be made completely subordinate to it” (*TTP* 15.169). To make matters worse, the hermeneutical strategy liberated the interpretation of Scripture, leaving it vulnerable to “men who boast that they have a supernatural light above the natural one would not want to yield in respect of knowledge to Philosophers, who have nothing besides the natural light” (*TTP* 13.156). To understand why this is not an exception and why the prospects for an increasingly rational society remain dim, Spinoza presents a fuller explanation of the nature of political power and its inherent irrationality.

THE POLITICAL EDUCATION OF PHILOSOPHERS

Spinoza’s analysis of power is unusual in the *TTP*, which generally argues from the premises embraced by believers in revelation. Here, he addresses the question of political power more theoretically, referring to nature rather than Scripture: the “highest law of nature is that each thing endeavor, as much as is in it, to persevere in its state—and do so without regard to anything but itself” (*TTP* 16.179).⁴⁷ In fact, this doctrine that “each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being” (and the correlate that this striving is “the actual essence of the thing”) is found repeatedly throughout Spinoza’s political and metaphysical writings.⁴⁸ Everything in the universe strives to increase its power—*conatus*, not *caritas*, is the fundamental condition of all things, including of course, philosophers (see *TTP* 16.179).⁴⁹

The striving to maintain and increase one’s power can be informed by reason, but this is rare. Instead, most individuals are prone to various passions and imaginings. Their judgments about pursuing certain goals or objects reflect their individual and distorted perception of their own well-being. “Each deems that he alone knows everything, and wants everything to be modified on the basis of his own mental cast, and figures something is equitable or inequitable . . . insofar as he judges it to fall to his profit or harm” (*TTP* 17.193).⁵⁰ As a result, political life is dominated by interests and passions: “The natural right of every man is thus determined, not by sound reason, but by desire and power” (*TTP* 16.180).⁵¹

The Maimonidean project attempts to create a community where reason and philosophy guide superstition and individual judgment. But reason cannot compete with the more immediate and compelling authority of interests and passions. While individual leaders like Maimonides may succeed

temporarily in winning the confidence of superstitious men, lasting success requires an extraordinary and improbable trust in the counsel of others. Since everyone is driven by the striving for power, there is no basis to trust others or believe that they have one's true interests at heart. Spinoza's solution does not attempt to replace superstition with reason or imagine that reason can acquire enough power to guide superstition. Instead, he creates salutary superstitions (e.g., the belief in progress) rooted in the Bible that limit the damage of irrationality, and he urges all decent men to accommodate themselves to such beliefs.

This strategy of accommodating superstition was discovered not by philosophers but by prudent statesmen who learned from experience how to manipulate effectively passions and interests. Spinoza readily concedes that these statesmen do not possess theoretical knowledge. For example, in his chapter on law, he explains that statesmen, like most men, do not understand natural law or the fixed and determined causal order of nature. Nonetheless, their understanding of political life in terms of authority and compelling obedience to the law conforms well to their subjects' perception of self-interest:

To restrict everyone equally, lawgivers have wisely established another aim [for the law], quite different from the one that follows necessarily from the nature of the laws: namely, by promising upholders of the laws what the vulgar love most, and on the other hand threatening those that violate them with what the vulgar fear most. And so they have endeavored to curb the vulgar as a horse by the rein, so far as it can be done. Hence it has come about that a plan of living, which is prescribed to human beings on the basis of an imperium of others is considered law to the greatest degree.
(*TTP* 4.44)

The fact that both rulers and subjects are ignorant of "the actual coordination and concatenation of things, that is, how things are ordained and linked together," makes little practical difference (*TTP* 4.58).⁵² Spinoza's political science teaches philosophers to become students of statesmen—that is, to learn from those writers like Machiavelli who have discovered the effectual truth of governing nonrational men. Theoretical truth, which is the ultimate goal of philosophy, proves to be an obstacle to creating effective political authority.

CONCLUSION

Spinoza presents two teachings on the question of miracles and providence in the *TTP*. First, he addresses believers with an account of miracles in the Hebrew Bible that exposes the Israelites' ignorance of nature and their subsequent error of allowing politics to determine their theology and their account of nature. This error is illustrated by their exclusive view of providence—namely, divine election and miracles. Spinoza's first critique of miracles—as a doctrine that reflects the ignorance of the Israelites—rests on this interpretation of Scripture. Christianity is able to correct these errors because Jesus and his apostles were philosophers who understood the universal character of providence. Although the apostles adapt their philosophical teaching to a superstitious audience, they proffer a new theological teaching of universal providence and salvation. This suggests that philosophy can accommodate its teachings to religion and thereby encourage widespread enlightenment and political stability. The success of Christianity appears to validate this strategy and suggest that real progress is possible in terms of moral and intellectual enlightenment. Spinoza's second critique of miracles strengthens this effort by shifting authority toward philosophy and science.⁵³

In sharp contrast, Spinoza's final critique of miracles points to a purely philosophical view of nature as fully determined and necessary.⁵⁴ Miracles are ruled out for defying the very conditions of science, and the doctrine of providence is exposed as superstition. God does not rule the universe or care more for humankind than anything else in nature; justice and goodness do not have supernatural support. This view of the relation between philosophy and religion is entirely at odds with Spinoza's earlier attempt to harmonize the Bible with philosophy. The philosophical doctrine of providence undermines any harmonization by denying the possibility of divine or natural support for justice, including those suggested by Spinoza's universal dogmas of faith. There can be no question of progress in educating the multitude with the philosophical view.⁵⁵

Spinoza's promulgation of contradictory views reveals his dual strategy for addressing the problem of superstition. On the one hand, he presents an account that points to the harmony between reason and revelation. The critique of miracles rests on and reinforces the authority of Scripture. Its purpose is to advance a universal view of providence. He allows a second,

more philosophical, critique of providence to emerge—one that exposes the belief in progress, particularly its presumption of a close relation between philosophy and politics, as a mere superstition.⁵⁶ The harmonizing account suggests that the surest sign of progress is the fact that the universal truths discovered by philosophy guide theology and politics. Spinoza's initial presentation of Christianity is part of a larger strategy rather than his last word on faith.

But to careful readers, the two accounts are hardly compatible. The philosophical account of providence reveals that justice has no natural or supernatural support and that common notions of good and evil are illusory.⁵⁷ Nothing in nature directs men's conduct or cares about human affairs. The laws of nature are fully determined and do not aim at any good. This view cannot be harmonized with revelation. Instead, Spinoza hopes to advance superstitions, such as the belief in progress, that enhance the status of reason. These superstitions are not intended to make men more rational. Spinoza's position can be best described as accommodation: superstitious men are encouraged to respect the authority of science with new superstitions, while philosophers are encouraged to embrace an account of revelation that leaves some room for philosophy.

To approach this issue somewhat differently, Spinoza suggests that the ancient Jews mistakenly formed their theology as a result of their political goals and their ignorance of nature. In sharp contrast, the Christian view is superior because it begins with an understanding of nature and derives a theology from this universal knowledge. Christian theology appears compatible with natural philosophy, since both take their bearings from the universal truths in nature. Indeed, Christ and the apostles are presented as philosophers who must accommodate their teachings to the multitude. Any superstitions that intrude into their teachings are the result of this accommodation. However, these assertions ignore the superstitious teaching on providence at the heart of Christian theology.

The belief in *caritas* is as destructive as the Hebrew belief in divine election, perhaps even more so because it distracts thoughtful individuals from the challenge of creating a stable political order. Spinoza presents his doctrine of power as a reminder of this grave challenge. This philosophical teaching rejects the reassuring belief in a divine power behind the human quest for justice. Yet, lest philosophy attempt to seize power, he teaches that philosophy cannot determine the contents of politics or theology—not only

because of the limits of reason but also because the quest for justice is itself an illusion. In its place, he substitutes modest political goals, toleration, and the freedom to philosophize (rather than intellectual virtue), and he builds a theology to accommodate these goals. In this respect, Spinoza's political theology resembles the ancient Jewish view.

NOTES

1. Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, in *Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Verlag, 1925), 3:1–267. I have also consulted Martin Yaffe's fine translation, *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise* (Newburyport, Mass.: Focus Philosophical Library, 2004). Quotations from the *TTP* follow Yaffe's translation, which cross-references Gebhardt's edition; numerals in subsequent citations of *TTP* indicate chapter and page. The quotation is from 6.68.

2. See C. H. Lorkowski, "The Miracle of Moses," *Heythrop Journal* 50, no. 2 (2009): 181–88. Lorkowski argues that Spinoza's argument is incoherent in the sense that it rests on the denial of any distinction between a natural and a supernatural realm.

3. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 218–19. See also Leora Batniksky, "Spinoza's Critique of Miracles," *Cardozo Law Review* 25 (2003): 507–18.

4. See G. H. R. Parkinson, "Spinoza on Miracles and Natural Law," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 31 (1977): 145–57, 156 in particular.

5. See Edwin Curley, "Spinoza on Miracles," in *Proceedings of the First Italian Congress on Spinoza*, ed. Emilia Giancotti (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1985), 421–38. By "epistemic grounds" Curley means that miracles are "impossible to accept rationally, given our other justified beliefs" (421). Curley claims that Spinoza's concept of a law of nature as a necessary truth is still plausible. According to Curley, contemporary philosophy is far more receptive to Spinoza's claim about the status of natural law and its relation to logical necessity, specifically "that laws of nature must be something more than just contingent Humean generalization of fact" (428).

6. For instance, an argument intended to appeal to religious believers. For more on the particular religious beliefs of Spinoza's audience, see Steven Frankel, "Politics and Rhetoric: The Intended Audience of Spinoza's 'Tractatus Theologico-Politicus,'" *Review of Metaphysics* 52, no. 4 (1999): 897–924.

7. Curley, "Spinoza on Miracles," 11. See also Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), esp. chaps. 4–6; Donagan argues that Spinoza advances a "naturalized theology" that allows us to move easily between the terms "nature" or "substance" and "God" without compromising the demands of reason.

8. Curley, "Spinoza on Miracles," 11. To be fair, Curley later made a serious effort to show how Spinoza's method might be employed by religious Christians to clarify contradictory teachings in the Gospels. See Curley, "Resurrecting Leo Strauss," in *Reading Between the Lines—Leo Strauss and the History of Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Winfried Schröder (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 129–70.

9. See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948), 333. Wolfson asserts that Spinoza's "reputed God-intoxication was really nothing but a hang-over of an earlier religious jag" (348). Richard McKeon treats Spinoza as the last of the Scholastics in *The Philosophy of Spinoza: The Unity of His Thought* (Woodbridge: Ox Bow Press, 1928).

10. Carlos Fraenkel, "Spinoza on Miracles and the Truth in the Bible," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74, no. 4 (2013): 643–58. A similar case is made by Steven Smith, who suggests that Spinoza's critique of miracles is part of an overall strategy to purge politics of religious influence and thereby inaugurate

a more rational, secular path, in *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Michael Rosenthal responds to Smith in "Miracles, Wonder, and the State in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*," in *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Rosenthal outlines the tension between philosophers who "think of themselves as proximate causes and they would probably attempt to deduce human laws from their understanding of the natural order" and the irrational multitude, who believe in miracles and venerate lawgivers (246, 247). Thus the critique of miracles undermines the very beliefs that make possible society among nonrational individuals. Spinoza's democracy does not represent "the transition from a divinely ordered world to a secular one" (249) but rather represents a world where religion coexists uneasily with a critique of religion.

11. See Leo Strauss's seminar "The Political Philosophy of Spinoza" of autumn 1959, which is forthcoming with the University of Chicago Press. Strauss argues in seminar #5 that "the whole theme of Spinoza's politics depends on the denial of miracles. . . . He is concerned not only with establishing a sovereign political power, in no way subject to the spiritual power, he is also concerned with establishing the independent authority of philosophy. . . . As long as revealed religion is admitted, of course revealed religion takes precedence. . . . The sovereignty of philosophy combined with the sovereignty of political society; this is his objective" (88–89).

12. Their political guidance of the multitude is effective precisely because it is not tethered in any way to reason and can conjure up fantastic interpretations of events through their imaginations.

13. Fraenkel, "Spinoza on Miracles," 656.

14. I say "deliberate contradiction" because it is in no way concealed. According to Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*, the second cause of a contradiction in a work is that "the author of a particular book has adopted a certain opinion that he later rejects; both his

original and later statements are retained in the book." This seems to be Fraenkel's view of the contradictions in Spinoza's *TTP*.

15. Spinoza notes that for the multitude, the highest good is bodily pleasure rather than intellectual virtue: "The carnal human being cannot understand these things; and they seem to him in vain since he has an extremely meager knowledge of God, and also since he finds nothing in this highest good which he might touch or eat, or which might affect the flesh—in which he delights most—inasmuch as it consists solely in theorizing and purely in the mind" (4.46).

16. The passage continues:

Each deems that he alone knows everything, and wants everything to be modified on the basis of his own mental cast, and figures something is equitable or inequitable, a propriety or impropriety, insofar as he judges it to fall to his profit or harm; out of glory, he despises his equals, and will not suffer being regulated by them; out of envy for better praise or fortune, which is never equal, he longs for evil to another and delights in it. There is no need to recount everything, since everyone of course knows what wickedness a disdain for the present and a longing to innovate matters, headstrong anger, and despicable poverty frequently induce in human beings, and how much these occupy and agitate their psyches. (17.193)

Spinoza concludes nonetheless that a legislator must accept such facts as permanent and set up an imperium in light of them—"This is the task, this is the labor."

17. Summarizing Spinoza's reading of Genesis as the basis of Spinoza's account of the origin of the belief in miracles, Leo Strauss writes in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 199:

Moses did not explicitly teach creation ex nihilo; Genesis 1:2 seems rather to show that he believed that God has made the visible universe out of pre-existing "chaos"; his complete silence about the creation of the angels or "the other gods" strongly suggests that he believed that the power

of God is, indeed, superior to, but not absolutely different from the power of other beings. To express Moses' thought in the language of philosophy, the power of nature (which is what he meant by "chaos," and by which he understood a blind "force, or impulse") is coeval with the power of God (an intelligent and ordering power), and the power of nature is therefore not dependent on, but merely inferior or subject to the power of God.

18. Revelation is a formidable obstacle to philosophy. See James Morrison, "Spinoza and History," in *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza*, ed. Richard Kennington (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1980), 176: "The philosophical quest for wisdom would be annulled in advance if one did not have complete confidence in one's ability to become wise. The possibility of revelation or a super-rational truth leaves open the possibility of a contra-rational truth and hence casts into doubt the certainty of reason's clear and distinct ideas. The 'deceiving demon' of revelation must therefore be exorcised by reason and philosophy themselves."

19. At the same time, Moses was not averse to using miracles to persuade the ignorant Israelites; see Spinoza, *TTP* 3.38–39: "The reality is that after Moses noted that the mental caste and spirit of his nation were stubborn, he clearly saw that without very great miracles and God's special external help, they could not complete matters that they had begun."

20. Pushing this argument to its limit, as we shall see, Spinoza claims that the account of miracles and providence taught in the Hebrew Bible is not only defective but leads to atheism.

21. Linguistic ignorance further contributes to this misunderstanding. The prophets sometimes employ obscure figures of speech that appear to refer to miracles when in reality they are simply metaphors for a natural event (e.g., Zechariah 14:7; cf. Spinoza, *TTP* 6.78).

22. The explanation of miracles as the result of scriptural hyperbole or figurative language, etc. is suggested by Maimonides throughout the *Guide*, especially at *Guide* 2.47; see also *Guide* 2.42, 46, 35, 42. See Hannah Kasher, "Biblical Miracles and the Universality of Natural Laws: Maimonides's Three Methods of

Harmonization," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1998): 25–52.

23. In chapter 2 of *Spinoza and Maimonides: Their Conflicting Views of Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), Joshua Parens points out that veneration (*veneratio*) and more generally wonder (*admiratio*, which is a part of *veneratio*) are central "philosophic passions" in ancient philosophy, because as a result of wondering about strange events and things, we desire to know. The desire to know is different from the desire to use and to produce, but the ancients resisted liberating the latter because, as Aristotle argues in the *Politics* (1268b22–1269a27), an emphasis on practical applications of knowledge alone undermines customs and traditions. Parens argues persuasively that for early modern thinkers, these very customs were viewed as a source of great instability and war. Bacon and Descartes are critical of wonder because it can lead to a kind of stupefaction and inaction. Similarly, Spinoza's critique of miracles is an attempt to limit such destabilizing forces and establish liberal democracy.

24. The prophets' teaching is "not universal" but intended only for the Hebrews (Spinoza, *TTP* 5.61). The Hebrews were commanded to love their neighbor, but they interpreted this to mean "fellow citizens," and they therefore hated their enemies (17.205). In contrast, Christ "taught that all men without exception should cultivate piety" (19.223).

25. Regarding the claim that we cannot know God from miracles, Spinoza says:

This same matter was rather obscure to almost all the Prophets namely, how the order of nature and the outcome for human beings could agree with the concept they had formed of God's providence: still, it was always quite clear to philosophers, who endeavor to understand things not from miracles, but from clear concepts—to those, no doubt, who assign true happiness to virtue and tranquility of spirit alone, and are not eager for nature to obey them but for themselves to obey nature—inasmuch as they know for certain that God directs nature as his universal laws require and not as the particular laws of human beings require, and thus God has

a plan, not for the human race alone but for the whole of nature. (*TTP* 6.73)

The prominence of miracles in the New Testament, central to every aspect of Christ's life and ministry, makes the rejection of miracles Spinoza's most audacious claim in the *TTP*.

26. "God is equally gracious, merciful, and the rest to all men" (*TTP* 3.36). "Paul concludes that since God is the God of all nations, that is, is equally gracious to all" (*TTP* 3.39); 1 Corinthians 9:20–22; cf. Spinoza, *TTP* 3.40.

27. Spinoza, *TTP* 3.39: "Paul concludes that, since God is the God of all nations, that is, is equally propitious to all, and since all men equally live under the law and under sin, therefore God sent his Christ to all nations, to free all men equally from the slavery of the law, so that they might no longer act by the command of the law, but by the steadfast decree of the spirit. Accordingly Paul teaches precisely what we mean."

28. See Manfred Walther, "Spinoza's Critique of Miracles: A Miracle of Criticism?" in *Spinoza: Critical Assessments*, ed. Genevieve Lloyd (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 284; according to Walther, this solution of separating the essential teaching of Scripture from "the historically contingent narrative forms of its various authors" is problematic because our perspective is equally subjective. What we claim as the essential or universal teaching of Scripture is nothing more than the "presuppositions of our own contemporary understanding."

29. Spinoza, *TTP* 5.62–63: "What Scripture means to teach which has to do with theory alone is mainly this: namely, there exists a God, or a being that has made everything, has directed and sustained it with the utmost wisdom, and takes the utmost care of human beings, namely those who live piously and honestly. The rest, however, he punishes with many comeuppances, and separates them from the good ones."

30. Spinoza, *TTP* 12.153 (emphasis added): "As this cornerstone is intact, we must admit the same of whatever other passages are indisputably dependent on it, and are also fundamental, as, for instance that a God exists, that He foresees all things, *that he exercises Providence for all*, that he is almighty, that by his decrees the good prosper and the

wicked come to naught, and, finally that our salvation depends solely on His grace. These are doctrines which Scripture plainly teaches throughout, and which it is bound to teach, *else all the rest would be empty and baseless*." The belief in providence is the basis for obedience to the law, and hence the morality of *caritas*.

31. More generally, Spinoza argues that the spheres of reason and nature are coextensive; a truth above reason would be a truth against reason. *TTP* 6.76: "For whatever is against nature is against reason, and what is against reason is absurd and so must be rejected." See Morrison, "Spinoza and History," 174n4.

32. The example that Spinoza cites the most often comes from the book of Joshua: "At the time of Joshua, the Hebrews believed with the vulgar that the sun moves with a diurnal motion, as they call it, and the earth is at rest; and to this preconceived opinion, they adapted the miracle that happened to them. . . . [This claim helped them] prove by experience itself that the sun is under the imperium of another deity, at whose nod it is bound to change its natural order" (*TTP* 16.77; see also 2.23).

33. See Steven Smith, *Spinoza's Book of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Smith explains how Spinoza adapts theological language to a host of novel concepts, including fortitude, which is the willingness to face the human situation without any metaphysical illusions.

34. Walter Soffer, "Modern Rationalism, Miracles, and Revelation: Strauss's Critique of Spinoza," in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 148. Miracles understood as events that do not have a cause or surpass human understanding are impossible (85).

35. See also Spinoza's *Ethics* 3, preface. According to Harry Wolfson, the equation of will and intellect was a standard medieval formula; see Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 402. This is certainly the case for Maimonides, see M. J. Sharpe, "'In the Court of a Great King': Some Remarks on Leo Strauss' Maimonides," *Sophia* 50 (2011): 141–58.

36. Curley, "Spinoza on Miracles," 15. Curley also explains that Spinoza has been criticized

for conflating the relation of logical consequence with that of causality (17).

37. "The laws of nature and the decrees of God" are synonymous for Spinoza; "laws in this precise sense follow necessarily from the nature of a thing and cannot be otherwise . . . the power of nature is infinite and her laws are broad enough to embrace everything conceived by the divine intellect" (*ITP* 6.69). As Curley points out, Spinoza could have claimed, without any reference to theology, that the laws of nature are logically necessary truths and that the laws of nature explain all events. Regarding the current status of the debate over the laws of nature, particularly Kripke's argument in *Naming and Necessity*, Curley reports that "there is a good deal of disagreement among contemporary philosophers of science over the logical status of the laws of nature. There is not a consensus in favor of a Humean view that they are mere contingent generalizations, as Parkinson suggests. There are, rather, strong positive reasons for supposing that the laws of nature are something more than that, centering around the problem of counterfactual conditionals" (Curley, "Spinoza on Miracles," 7).

38. The problem with this argument from the point of view of a believer is that it is not conclusive. Despite our ignorance of nature, we still know that some things are impossible. If someone is dead and entombed for "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," as Matthew 12:40 reports, then we can be confident that their resurrection is miraculous. In other words, the fact that our understanding of nature is incomplete does not preclude our knowledge that some things are by nature impossible. This argument, which does not explicitly refer to the equation of God's will and intellect, nonetheless frames the critique of miracles in religious terms that equate God's will with the eternal laws of nature. See also Maimonides's *Treatise on Resurrection*, where he describes the miracle of resurrection of the dead, in Ralph Lerner, *Maimonides's Empire of Light: Popular Enlightenment in an Age of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

39. Walther, "Spinoza's Critique of Miracles," 286.

40. Curley, "Spinoza on Miracles," 427. Spinoza describes providence in terms of

the natural order and asserts that the natural order is fully determined. To the extent that we understand these laws, we can profit from them. The notion of divine providence turns out to be little more than our own efforts to preserve our existence. If we benefit from the laws of nature without understanding them, Spinoza refers to that as the "external aid of God." In the *Ethics*, Spinoza reiterates that nothing is contingent in nature: "If things, therefore, could have been of a different nature, or have been conditioned to act in a different way, so that the order of nature would have been different, God's nature would also have been able to be different from what it now is, and therefore that different nature would have perforce existed, and consequently there would have been able to be two or more Gods. This is absurd" (1.31). Spinoza's presentation of God as imminent necessity in nature is at odds with the Jewish view of a creator who stands outside of nature, nor is this teaching consistent with the Christian view that God allows man the freedom to choose salvation.

41. See Spinoza, *Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts* 2.7: The God portrayed in the Bible is the God of Providence who is just and charitable—this God has nothing to do with the God of reason: "An intellectual knowledge of God which takes cognizance of his nature insofar as it actually is . . . has no bearing whatever on the true rules of conduct, on faith, or on revealed religion; consequently men may be in complete error on the subject without incurring the charge of sinfulness" (159). Spinoza's use of the expression "God is equally gracious to all" is deliberately ambiguous. It can mean that God truly cares about our fate or, to the contrary, God is equally indifferent to the fate of all individuals. See Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 171. Strauss remarks in a seminar on Spinoza, "God does not care at all for anyone. One fate meets the just and the unjust. . . . Traces of divine justice are found only where just men reign. . . . Absolutely everything depends on human government, if you have any interest in justice. Politics becomes infinitely more important than theology" because there is no divine intervention or miracles (see Strauss, seminar on Spinoza, 77, 182).

42. Spinoza, *Political Treatise* 2.8.

43. See Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, "Life of Alexander," sects. 7–8. Spinoza also uses Curtius's *Life of Alexander*. For the sake of brevity, I have focused on the example of Alexander. But Spinoza's list of pious frauds or founders includes Augustus, Cleon, and possibly Moses. See *TTP* 17.194–95.

44. I've analyzed these examples in "Politics and Rhetoric."

45. Spinoza later evaluates the power of the priests, the Levites, in the Mosaic regime (*TTP* 19.221–22, 226). Eventually, as with the Turkish example, the priests "usurped political right and obtained absolute sovereignty" (236). The regime soon became overwhelmed with superstition.

46. Compare this critique of Maimonides with Strauss's defense in *Philosophy and Law*, trans. Eva Brann (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 102–3:

Medieval philosophers were precisely not Enlighteners in the proper sense; for them it was not a question of spreading light, of educating the multitude to rational knowledge, of enlightening; again and again, they enjoin upon the philosophers the duty of keeping secret from the unqualified multitude the rationally known truth; for them—in contrast to the Enlightenment proper, that is, the modern Enlightenment—the esoteric character of philosophy was unconditionally established. To be sure, even in the 17th and 18th centuries there were men, to quote Voltaire, who claimed: "*Quand la populace se mêle de raisonner, tout est perdu*" and on the other hand, even men like Maimonides had in mind a certain enlightenment of all men. But if one considers that the modern Enlightenment, as opposed to the medieval, generally publicizes its teachings, one will not object to the assertion that the medieval Enlightenment was essentially esoteric, while the modern Enlightenment was essentially exoteric.

47. For more on the scientific study of human nature, see Spinoza's *Political Treatise* 1.4.

48. For instance, Spinoza's *Ethics* 6–7, and his *Political Treatise* 2.4.

49. Men are subject to nature and nature's laws of necessity even as they work through human nature. To imagine that we can exempt ourselves from this necessity is akin to imagining a realm beyond nature. The belief that philosophers or theologians are primarily concerned with reason and by extension care for the welfare of others is little more than a superstition, a belief in a special group of individuals who are a kingdom within a kingdom.

50. Spinoza's account of human action is developed in his *Ethics*, pt. 3, especially propositions 28–39. For a more detailed commentary, see Harold Skulsky, *Staring into the Void: Spinoza, Master of Nihilism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), 121–29. See also Eugene Garver, *Spinoza and the Cunning of Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

51. See Spinoza, *Political Treatise* 1.4, in which he claims religion is ineffective in the face of the passions: "Although all are persuaded that religion, on the contrary, teaches every man to love his neighbor as himself, that is to defend another's right just as much as his own, yet we showed that this persuasion has too little power over the passions. It avails, indeed, in the hour of death, when disease has subdued the very passions, and man lies inert, or in temples, where men hold no traffic, but least of all, where it is most needed, in the law-court or the palace."

52. In the *TTP*, Spinoza explains this ignorance in terms of fortune, which he defines as "the ordinance of God insofar as it directs human life through external and unexpected means" (4.45). "Whatever human nature can guarantee out of its own power alone for preserving its being, we can deservedly call God's internal help, and whatever turns out to be useful to it on the basis of the power of external causes, God's external help" (3.32). In the *Ethics*, he will support this argument with a metaphysical argument regarding the power of nature. Here he sticks closely to the nonphilosophical claims about miracles offered by those who, lacking scientific knowledge, establish generalization about nature based on their random experience (*experientia vaga*). It is important to

note that Spinoza does not establish his metaphysical claims with extensive arguments in the *TTP*; rather, he prefaces them with the remark “as I have said before and show elsewhere.” See Curley, “Spinoza on Miracles,” 427.

53. Spinoza alleviates religion’s hostility toward philosophy by associating philosophy with the divine law of Jesus. Moreover, because of the substantial agreement between philosophy and Christianity, philosophy can assist theologians in their efforts to understand Jesus’s teaching and purify it of the prejudices of ancient Jews and Gentiles. Thus the critique of Scripture ameliorates the theological and political problems while, at the same time, exposing the true, divine teachings of Scripture.

54. Spinoza asserts that “nothing can happen against nature” and that “by providence nothing can be understood except the order of nature” (*TTP* 16.180).

55. Everything in nature is fully determined, even the equal right of the wise and the foolish. Spinoza, *TTP* 16.180: “Just as the wise man has the highest right to everything that reason dictates, or to live on the basis of the laws of reason, so too he who is ignorant and weak-spirited has the highest right to everything that the appetite urges, or to live on the basis of the laws of appetite.” An individual’s

judgment about the best means to their own preservation takes priority over other claims of wisdom or reason (Spinoza, *Political Treatise* 2.12). The wise may have better strategies for preserving themselves, but the unwise cannot or will not recognize their wisdom. This is because the unwise neither recognize their true good nor admit the superiority of the wise.

56. See Douglas Den Uyl, *God, Man, and Well-Being: Spinoza’s Modern Humanism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 108: “Opinions can be true, but the truth of an opinion does not of itself move it to a higher level of knowledge. For that to occur, the idea must be ordered by reason and integrated with others into a coherent intellectual framework.”

57. Moreover, the philosophical view exposes the causes for the superstitious view of providence as well as its perpetual attractiveness: “Ordinary people have found no stronger proof of God’s providence and rule than that based on the ignorance of causes. This shows clearly that they have no knowledge at all of the nature of God’s will, and that they have attached a human will to him, i.e., a will really distinct from the intellect. I think this misconception has been the sole cause of superstition.” Spinoza, *Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts* 2.7.

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Liberalism and Christianity

Locke's Use of the Bible in the "Second Treatise"

NASSER BEHNEGAR

Ever since the experiment to repurpose Christian churches as “Temples of Reason” faltered in France, political theorists have tended to trace modernity back to Christian beliefs. Alexis de Tocqueville presents equality as a providential fact fostered by the teaching of Jesus. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel finds the ideal of freedom in the union of the finite and the infinite embodied in Jesus, Friedrich Nietzsche sees modern science and atheism as outgrowths of Christian asceticism, Max Weber finds the roots of the spirit of capitalism in Protestant identification of work with salvation, and in subsequent years variations of this general view have come to flourish among scholars.¹ At the same time, the view that modernity has its roots in a critique of the biblical and classical traditions is still alive.² This controversy is evident in the scholarship on John Locke, who is perhaps the most influential of all liberal thinkers. Despite the great attention paid to him there is surprising disagreement among his interpreters regarding some basic issues, including the relation between his political thought and Christianity.

Three basic positions stand out. First, there are those who hold that Locke was a sincere, if unorthodox, Christian who developed a political philosophy that was based on reasoning from evidence available to all men. Locke, on this view, was both a Christian and a political philosopher because he thought that the conclusions of reason agree, or at least do not

disagree, with those of the Scriptures. This reading has the advantage of conforming to the broad impression left by the surface of Locke's text, but it has the disadvantage of providing a Locke who is "full of illogical flaws and inconsistencies" or intellectual gaps.³ An alternative reading of Locke originated in Leo Strauss's essay in his *Natural Right and History* and was articulated more fully by his student Richard Cox.⁴ Since then it has informed a significant body of Locke scholarship, including works that disagree with Strauss in many other important respects, such as his preference for classical over modern thought.⁵ This reading was partly a contribution to Strauss's thesis about esoteric writing.⁶ According to Strauss, Locke was essentially a Hobbesian who consciously accommodated the expression of his thought to Christian sentiments partly to avoid persecution and partly to win as many adherents as possible to his political cause. In the aftermath of Strauss's work, a third position on Locke has emerged, first in the work of John Dunn. According to this view, Locke's political philosophy rests on distinctly Christian ideas. Dunn argues that Locke's notions of our rights and duties depend "on a view of man's place in nature as one in which each man is fully instructed by the Deity on how he ought to live," and while Locke may have thought that his political philosophy was based on a natural theology, his was "a natural theology undertaken by a mind saturated in the Christian revelation."⁷ Dunn's thesis about the Christian character of Locke's political theory has been very influential, endorsed even by some scholars who do not share the hermeneutic maxims of the so-called Cambridge school.⁸ Whereas Strauss's interpretation is paradoxical because it contradicts the surface impression of Locke's writings, Dunn's is paradoxical because it cuts the link between Locke and his Enlightenment admirers: "If the Enlightenment is genuinely his legacy, it was scarcely the legacy which he wished to leave."⁹

This study attempts to intervene in this impasse by examining the quotations from the Bible in the *Second Treatise of Government*, exploring the meaning of each passage in its original biblical context and comparing it to the Lockean doctrine that it purportedly supports. We have chosen this text, as opposed to the *First Treatise*, because in the *Second Treatise* Locke develops his own positive political theory, allowing a comparison between Locke's own position and that of the Bible. Although others have discussed some of these quotations, no one has done a comprehensive review of them. Such a review is decisive because it can disclose patterns of biblical usage if

any such exist, whereas a deviation from a biblical doctrine in one passage may just be due to an idiosyncratic reading, an honest mistake, or a case of Locke “flinching.”¹⁰ But being attentive to the considerations of space, we have omitted in our presentation the analysis of the ten “anthropological” quotations that occur in §109, which deals with the nature of kingship in early times.¹¹

The object is to test two hypotheses. First, since Locke’s political theory is not avowedly derived from the Bible, one would expect that when he does quote a biblical passage he would choose one that unambiguously supports his position (Hypothesis 1). Alternatively, Locke’s accusation against Robert Filmer might also be applicable to himself. He might have treated the Bible violently, forcing a passage to fit his doctrine “as *Procrustes* did with his guests, lop or stretch them, as may best fit them to the size of” his notions.¹² Now, he might have done this because he was an unscrupulous ideologue, intent on promoting his political agenda without any interest in the truth of the matter (Hypothesis 2a), or because he sought to promote his political agenda by showing his more intellectually demanding readers the nature of his disagreement with the Bible while cultivating the contrary impression in others (Hypothesis 2b). These two versions of the second hypothesis are often blurred, and elements of both are found in Strauss’s treatment of Locke in *Natural Right and History*.¹³

This study addresses a large issue by focusing on limited textual questions. We will not compare Locke’s natural law doctrine as a whole to the Christian or the biblical teaching as a whole. Instead, we will examine discrete parts of Locke’s teaching and discrete parts of the Bible. The limited character of the text will exercise a kind of discipline, allowing us to be more in command of the controversial issues. We of course do not expect to settle the dispute between the Cambridge and the Chicago schools. That dispute involves entirely different intellectual frameworks and different understandings of the character of philosophy and of its relation to society and history. But we hope our study will be useful to those who do not confuse the diversity of Christian sects in the seventeenth century with a historical relativism that regards the Bible as a work of literature susceptible to infinite valid interpretations. This common belief that one cannot with propriety speak of Christian or biblical teaching in the seventeenth century is unhistorical in the sense of being contrary to the opinions of the thinkers and actors of that century. For their very controversies were about the true

meaning of Christianity, and while they disagree about a few passages in the Bible, these disagreements occur in the context of a much wider common understanding.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL PASSAGES

1–2

Locke quotes the Bible twice in *Second Treatise* §11 to support capital punishment for murder as a dictate of the natural law: “And upon this is grounded the great Law of Nature, *Who so sheddeth Mans Blood, by Man shall his Blood be shed*. And Cain was so fully convinced, that every one had a Right to destroy such a Criminal, that after the Murther of his Brother, he cries out, *Every one that findeth me, shall slay me*; so plain was it writ in the Hearts of all Mankind.” The first quotation is from Genesis 9:6 where God is giving a new law to mankind—that is, to Noah and his sons after the flood. Locke argues that this positive divine law is also “the great Law of Nature.” The reference to Cain is biblical evidence for this identification. Even before being told, he knew murderers are to be slain. This is a weighty argument, but it also brings out the tension between Locke’s notion of natural law and the biblical teaching. For Locke, natural law is an unchanging law that serves as the standard for positive laws, but the story of Cain makes it clear that God is willing to make laws that contradict natural law as Locke understands it. When God proposes to punish Cain by banishing him, Cain notes that people kill fugitives and vagabonds and complains of the harshness of a punishment that is tantamount to death. God agrees with Cain and puts him under his protection. Neither Cain nor God (at that time) believed in the propriety of capital punishment.

God changed his mind as we see from the law that he gives to Noah and his sons. This law, however, is not quite identical to Locke’s natural law. As Cox observes, Locke omits the second half of the verse, which gives the ground of the law: “For in the image of God made he man.”¹⁴ A murderer should be killed because he has attacked God. As “the Learned and Judicious [Henry] Ainsworth” puts it, the injury is also “to God himself.”¹⁵ Locke, however, argues that a murderer deserves death because he has “declared War against all Mankind.” Both Locke and Genesis 9:6 agree that death is the proper penalty for murder, but they do so on completely different and even contradictory grounds. The very phrasing of the divine law implies

that retribution is one of the motives of the punishment, and elsewhere when Locke speaks of divine punishment he refers to retribution (*Second Treatise* §176). But according to Locke's own teaching, retribution is not a legitimate reason for punishment; reparation and restraint (which includes deterrence) are "the only reasons" for punishment (§8).

The Bible suggests that there is an inalienable dignity that is retained even by a murderer according to Henry Ainsworth: "The 'image of God' in men is defaced by sin, but not wholly, and man's nature having a soul spiritual, understanding immortal, & still remained, wherein part of God's image is yet to be seen in man."¹⁶ Locke, however, uses the fact that the Bible requires the same punishment for a human being or a wild animal who has killed a human being, as found in Genesis 9:5, as a ground for denying the biblical belief in the inalienable dignity of man: a murderer may be "destroyed as a *Lyon* or a *Tyger*, one of those Wild Savage Beasts, with whom men can have no Society nor Security" (*Second Treatise* §11). Even Jeremy Waldron, who insists on the Christian foundation of Locke's political theory, admits that Locke's "bestialization of criminals" is incompatible with biblical theology.¹⁷

The tension between natural law and divine law is not merely an issue between philosophy and revelation; it also bears on the relationship between the Old and the New Testament. The Hebrew Bible does not have a word for nature; it either implicitly rejects the whole idea of natural law or has not yet developed it.¹⁸ The main stream of Christianity, following Paul, maintains that the idea is implicit in the Bible. Locke alludes to the crucial passage. His claim that the justice of capital punishment is written "in the Hearts of all Mankind" is an echo of Paul's claim that "the work of the law is written in their [the Gentiles'] hearts," which is the basis of Paul's doctrine that even the Gentiles are sinners and hence in need of a redeemer (Romans 2:14–15). Locke alludes to this passage while discussing Genesis 4:14, the place where Christian commentators claim to see evidence of a natural conscience in the Old Testament. As Ainsworth puts it, Cain's words "showeth his terror in conscience, fearing just recompense."¹⁹ But is the Christian reading of Genesis 4:14 correct? Locke suggests that reading is only partly true. Cain, indeed, knows the men believe they have a right to kill murderers, but he denies the justice of this practice, at least in his own case. Shortly after mentioning the story of Cain, Locke writes, "He who was so unjust as to do his Brother an Injury, will scarce be so just as to condemn himself for it" (*Second Treatise* §13). Accordingly, for Locke

“conscience” does not punish the violators of law and therefore is not a sufficient sanction for natural law.

By showing the discrepancy between its two parts, Locke casts doubt on the authority of the Bible. Contrary to the first impression, Locke does not accept Paul’s view that everyone has an innate knowledge of the divine law. He explicitly rejects the notion of innate moral laws in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He implicitly rejects it in the *Second Treatise* by maintaining that natural law is known only to those who consult their reason (§12). By pretending to agree with Paul, Locke uses Paul’s authority as a license to develop his own very different natural law, which is discovered through a process of reasoning and is not written in the hearts of mankind.

3

In *Second Treatise* §21 Locke discusses the story of Jephtha to support his argument that every person has the right to wage war against anyone who, in one’s own judgment, has put himself in a state of war with one:

The Lord the Judge (says he) *be Judge this day between the Children of Israel, and the Children of Ammon, Judg.11.27.* and then Prosecuting, and relying on his *appeal*, he leads out his Army to Battle: And therefore in such Controversies, where the question is put, *who shall be Judge?* It cannot be meant, who shall decide the Controversie; every one knows what *Jephtha* here tells us, that *the Lord the Judge*, shall judge. Where there is no Judge on Earth, the *Appeal* lies to God in Heaven. That Question then cannot mean, who shall judge? whether another hath put himself in a State of War with me, and whether I may as *Jephtha* did, appeal to Heaven in it? Of that I my self can only be Judge in my own Conscience, as I will answer it at the great Day, to the Supream Judge of all Men.

The biblical example concerns a controversy between two independent nations. But Locke uses this example to justify the right of a person to wage war against his government.²⁰ He applies a lesson from foreign policy to a domestic situation, where there is an established authority. Now, there is no biblical warrant for such an application. Indeed, the story of Jephtha itself includes a most extreme example of submission to political-familial-religious authority: Jephtha’s daughter submits to her own death, in obedience to her father’s vow to sacrifice the first living thing he meets upon his homecoming.

Locke hints at his critique of Jephtha's position by subtly misrepresenting the biblical narrative. He writes, "Relying on his *appeal*, [Jephtha] leads out his Army to Battle." Yet in the Bible Jephtha does not rely on his appeal; he attempts to influence God's decision by offering to sacrifice the first person he meets upon his homecoming after his victory. This offer betrays a certain doubt about the justice of his cause. The biblical narrative suggests that Jephtha's appeal was just (God gives him the victory) while his doubts were sinful. The outcome has all the appearance of a punishment: the first person he saw on his return to home was his beloved daughter. Strauss observes that Locke has the opposite assessment of the situation: "[Locke] quotes more than once Jephtha's saying 'the Lord the Judge be judge'; but he *fails to allude* to the fact that Jephtha's statement is made in the context of a controversy about the right of conquest, as well as to Jephtha's entirely un-Lockean view of the rights of the conqueror."²¹ According to Jephtha, the land in question belongs to the Israelites because they conquered it three hundred years ago and during all that time the Ammonites had not attempted to recover it, as related in Judges 11:24 and 26. Locke, however, denies that conquest gives the conqueror a right to the property of the conquered and argues that if the victim is too weak to demand his right his descendants can renew their appeal: "They may *appeal*, as *Jephtha* did, to *Heaven*, and repeat their *Appeal* till they have recovered the native Right of their ancestors" (*Second Treatise* §176). This allusion to Jephtha, to the man who denied the legitimacy of such an appeal to restore one's conquered land, is certainly ironic and directs the reader to compare Locke's discussion of conquest with his earlier treatment of Jephtha in *Second Treatise* §21.

Locke is also critical of Jephtha's conviction that God acts in this world. Jephtha claims that God will judge the dispute between the Israelites and the Ammonites "this day" (the day he discusses it with the Ammonite king) with the expectation that the result would become evident on the day of the battle. But when Locke speaks of his decision that another has put himself in a state of war with him, he says he will answer to God for his decision on "the Great Day," meaning the Day of Last Judgment. He has no expectation of God intervening on earth. In his view victory goes not to the just but to the strong.²² According to John Calvin, the proper response to the injustices of rulers is an appeal to heaven, for "it belongs not to us to cure these evils, that all that remains for us is to implore the help of the Lord in whose hands are the hearts of kings, and inclinations of kingdom."²³ Locke, too, calls for

an “appeal to Heaven” but he transforms its meaning from a prayer to a declaration of war (hence a motto placed on the flags of American ships during the Revolutionary War), from an expression of man’s dependency to the ultimate expression of self-assertion.

It has been argued that the absence of a providential natural theology in the *Second Treatise* leaves Locke’s political theory with an important gap, but it seems to me that such a theology, if it were available, would destroy the foundation of his political theory.²⁴ According to him, in the state of nature everyone has the right to execute the law of nature because “the *Law of Nature* would, as all other Laws that concern Men in this World, be in vain, if there were no body that in the State of Nature, had a *Power to Execute* that Law” (*Second Treatise* §7). But this right, and its consequent great inconveniences, would not be necessary if God executed the law of nature in this world.

But does Locke’s political theory depend on God’s justice in the other world? Amazingly, the passage under consideration contains the only reference to the next life in the *Second Treatise*. The next life here is not part of the general sanctions of natural law.²⁵ Instead, Locke discusses it in a specific context, using the first person singular. If there is an afterlife, Locke informs us, he is prepared to defend himself before God for waging war against those who have put themselves in a state of war with him. I say if there is an afterlife, because Locke’s political theory is based on the opposite supposition. According to Locke, one has a right to kill another whom one judges to pose an existential threat, because death is an irreparable harm (*Second Treatise* §19). Death, however, would not be an irreparable harm if God can restore life. If one were confident of an afterlife where the just receive their due, I doubt one would have the right to kill an armed robber, as Locke claims we do in §18, simply because he might choose to kill one.

4

In *Second Treatise* §25 Locke argues that both reason and Scripture maintain that God has given the earth to mankind in common: “Whether we consider natural *Reason*, which tells us, that Men, being once born, have a right to their Preservation, and consequently to Meat and Drink, and such other things, as Nature affords for their Subsistence: Or *Revelation*, which gives us an account of those Grants God made of the World to *Adam*, and to *Noah*, and his Sons, ’tis very clear, that God, as King *David* says, *Psal.*

CXV. xvj. *has given the Earth to the Children of Men*, given it to Mankind in common.” While giving the impression that reason and Scripture tend to agree, Locke points out profound disagreements. Reason, he says, gives mankind a right to meat, but Adam was not given this right: he “could not make bold with a Lark or a Rabbet to satisfie his hunger” (*First Treatise* §39). After the flood, the dictates of Scripture and reason come closer, but they never meet. Reason gives mankind a right to drink any liquid that sustains them, but Noah and his sons did not have a right to drink the blood of animals. In general, reason gives greater power to mankind. This is true even of the agreement that seems “very clear.” Immediately after quoting King David, Locke alters the text: “God gave the World to *Adam* and his Posterity” (*Second Treatise* §25).²⁶ The substitution of “World” for “Earth” amounts to an enlargement, for the Bible contrasts the Earth with the Heaven, on the one hand, and the Ocean, on the other. The Bible reminds man of his powerlessness against the Leviathan (Job 41:1–7), but Locke refers to “the Ocean, that great and still remaining Common of Mankind,” and he explicitly acknowledges the power and the right of man to possess the “Ambergriese” of whales (*Second Treatise* §30).²⁷

5

In *Second Treatise* §31 Locke considers a charge against his labor theory of property: if the mere gathering of anything gives one a right to it, “then anyone may ingross as much as he will.” He responds by quoting Paul’s first epistle to Timothy: “*God has given us all things richly*, 1 Tim. vi. 17 is the Voice of Reason confirmed by Inspiration. But how far has he given it to us? *To enjoy*.” It is irrational to waste things because one cannot enjoy them, and by avoiding waste, one leaves things for others to enjoy. This prohibition against waste becomes part of Locke’s defense of accumulation of money, which, unlike other goods, does not spoil. This is an ingenuous use of Paul, who in this very chapter of his epistle to Timothy declares that “love of money is the root of all evil.” Paul’s statement is part of his argument against man’s preoccupation with riches, a preoccupation that leads to the neglect of charity (1 Timothy 6:17–18). Paul says nothing about the irrationality of wasting things, and Locke in his chapter on property says nothing about charity.²⁸ As to Paul’s contention that God has given us all things richly, Locke in this very chapter simply denies it. Nature indeed has presented us with things of great potentiality, but only human labor can actualize that potentiality:

“Nature and the Earth furnished only the almost worthless materials, as in themselves” (*Second Treatise* §43).

6–9

In *Second Treatise* §52 Locke takes issue with the term “Paternal Power,” preferring “Parental Power,” because “Nature, and the right of Generation” and revelation recognize that the mother has an equal share of power over her children: “We see the positive law of God every where joyns them together, without distinction, when it commands the Obedience of Children, *Honour thy Father and thy Mother*, Exod. 20. 12. *Whosoever curseth his Father or his Mother*, Lev. 20. 9. *Ye shall fear every Man his Mother and his Father*, Lev. 19. 3. *Children Obey your Parents*, &c. Eph. 6.1. is the stile of the Old and New Testament.” This section resembles §61 of the *First Treatise*, where Locke cites fourteen biblical passages to show that God “joynd *Mother* to *Father*” in declaring their power over their children. Here Locke chooses four of these quotations, it seems, in order to address the alleged harmonies between the Old and New Testaments and between Nature and Revelation.

The Old and New Testaments join father and mother whenever they address children’s obligations to their parents. But they understand these obligations differently from Locke, and each has a different understanding of their purpose. This is evident from a comparison of the first and the fourth quotations. The first is from the fourth or the fifth commandment, the second half of which Locke omits: “Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.” The fourth quotation is from Paul quoting this very commandment. The passage, together with the two verses that follow it, reads, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with thee, and thou mayst live long on the earth.” Paul alters the original commandment, turning it into an intrinsically just rule (“for this is right”), expanding the promise (“it may be well with thee”) while depoliticizing it (earth replaces “the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee”). Paul alters God’s words perhaps because he was living in different circumstances, writing to Hellenized Christians at Ephesus, at a time when the Israelites had lost their independent political existence.

Paul equates honoring one’s parents with obeying them. Locke agrees with Paul’s interpretation, for he reads all four passages as instances of commanding “the Obedience of Children.” Thus the Bible implicitly rejects the

distinction between obeying and honoring parents, a distinction central to Locke's teaching in this very chapter about the duties of grown-up children to their parents. According to Locke, children always have the obligation to honor their parents (at least those who were good to them), but once they reach adulthood they do not owe obedience.

The second and the third quotations show the tension between the Old Testament and "Nature, and the Right of Generation." The second is from a passage that obligates the Jews to punish by death any child that curses his parents: "For every one that curseth his father or his mother shall be surely put to death." In the *First Treatise*, Locke speaks against the unnatural behavior of the savages who kill their own children (§§56, 58); and in the chapter of the *Second Treatise* in which the above quotations appear Locke speaks of the natural obligation of preserving one's children while denying the extension of parental power "to the Lives or Goods" of their children (§65). There is clearly some tension between Locke's teaching about natural obligations and rights and this divine commandment. Locke discusses the third quotation ("Ye shall fear every Man his Mother and his Father") in a parallel section in the *First Treatise*. He cites the passage to support his view that "the Scripture makes the Authority of *Father and Mother*, in respect of those they have begot, so equal, that in some **places** it neglects, even the Priority of Order, which is thought due to the Father, and the Mother is put first, as Lev. 19.3" (*First Treatise* §61; bold emphasis added). This is a rare reversal of the usual order, and the most likely reason for this exception is that human beings naturally fear their fathers more than their mothers, making a divine injunction necessary to counteract this natural state of affairs. These two exceptions show that the filial piety commanded by the Bible is based neither on "the Right of Generation" nor on "Nature."

10

In *Second Treatise* §65 Locke denies the absolute power of fathers by imprecisely quoting Jesus, who in turn is imprecisely quoting Genesis 2:24, as described in Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:7: "And it must be far from an absolute or perpetual Jurisdiction, from which a Man may withdraw himself, having Licence from Divine Authority to *leave Father and Mother and cleave to his Wife*."²⁹ By omitting the "shall" before "leave," Locke can play with the dual meaning of "leave" ("depart from" and "permission"). But is the jurisdiction of the parents limited to their home? Does departing from

their home mean that one no longer has to obey them? As far as I know, Locke's is the only use of this verse to justify restrictions on the power of parents. The verse, however, is quoted by Jesus to declare a stricter law than that of Moses, which allows divorce and polygamy. Coincidentally, in this very section Locke discusses divorce and polygamy. Controverting the claim that only the natural father of a child has the power to command him, he writes, "And what will become of this *Paternal Power* in that part of the World where one Woman hath more than one Husband at a time? Or in those parts of *America* where once the Husband and Wife part, which happens frequently, the children are all left to the Mother, follow her, and are wholly under her Care and Provision?" Locke's questions, of course, would lose their relevance if he thought that these practices were morally impermissible or contrary to natural law. Polyandry and easy divorce laws that favor the wife—practices not recognized by either the Old or the New Testament—are morally permissible in Locke's view.³⁰

11

In *Second Treatise* §67 Locke argues that while fathers have the power to command and to chastise their children in their minority, this power is to be used only for the good of the children. Hence, it is "rather the Privilege of Children, and Duty of Parents, than any Prerogative of Paternal Power." In support of this view he writes, "And therefore God Almighty when he would express his gentle dealing with the *Israelites*, he tells them, that tho' he chastened them, he *chastened them as a Man chastens his Son*, Deut. 8.5. i.e. with tenderness and affection, and kept them under no severer Discipline than what was absolutely best for them, and had been less kindness to have slacken'd." Yet in Deuteronomy this verse is used for an altogether opposite purpose. There God's fatherly love for the Israelites is used to support his political rule over them: "*Therefore* thou shalt keep the commands of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him" (Deuteronomy 8:6; emphasis added). Moreover, in the very same chapter God testifies to the Israelites that he will destroy them as a nation if one of them walks after other gods (Deuteronomy 8:19–20).

12

In *Second Treatise* §68 Locke revisits Paul's statement from Ephesians 6:1 by alluding to Colossians 3:20. While arguing that adult persons owe honor

but not full obedience to their parents, he writes, “For who can think the Command *Children obey your Parents*, requires in a Man that has Children of his own the same submission to his Father, as it does in his yet young Children to him, and that by this precept he were bound to obey **all** his Father’s Commands, if out of a conceit of Authority he should have the indiscretion to treat him still as a Boy?” (bold emphasis added). “Children” (*tekna* in the original Greek) is an ambiguous term. Locke begins the sentence with an appeal to common sense that the same level of submission is not due from adult children as it is from the young. This becomes a stepping stone to an interpretation of Colossians 3:20: “Children, obey *your* Parents, in all things.” If Paul were sensible, he must have been referring to young children in Colossians. He could not have meant that adult children should obey their parents in all things. But since Paul uses the same word in Ephesians, one may interpret that passage also to refer to young children. He must have meant that young children must obey their parents. One may wonder whether this was Paul’s meaning, whether Paul passed Locke’s test of having good sense, but there is no doubt about the movement of Locke’s own reasoning. He uses his reading of Colossians (adult children do not have to obey their parents in all things) as a stepping stone to a thought developed in the next section, where he declares that “the power of Commanding ends with Nonage” (*Second Treatise* §69). Adult children do not have to obey their parents in anything.

13

In *Second Treatise* §196 Locke supports his contention that not even promises and covenants obligate one to obey a conqueror by citing the example of Hezekiah:

Thus, notwithstanding whatever Title the Kings of Assyria had over Judah, by the Sword, God assisted *Hezekiah* to throw off the Dominion of the Conquering Empire. *And the Lord was with Hezekiah, and he prospered; wherefore he went forth, and he rebelled against the King of Assyria, and served him not*, 2 Kings XVIII. vij. Whence it is plain, that shaking off a Power, which Force, and not Right has set over any one, though it hath the name of *Rebellion*, yet is no Offence before God, but is that, which he allows and countenances, though even Promises and Covenants, when obtain’d by force, have intervened.

For 'tis very probable to any one that reads the story of *Ahaz*, and *Hezekiah* attentively, that the *Assyrians* subdued *Ahaz*, and deposed him, and made *Hezekiah* King in his Father's Life time; and that *Hezekiah* by agreement had done him Homage, and paid him Tribute all this time.

The basis of Locke's attentive reading seems to be the following. The dates given in 2 Kings 16:2, 17:1, and 18:1 imply that Hezekiah became king one or two years before his father, Ahaz, died. It appears that the Assyrians had deposed Ahaz and put his son in his place. And given that in 2 Kings 18:14 Hezekiah admits to the Assyrian king that he had sinned, it appears that he had broken a promise to the Assyrian king, who had come to punish him. Since God approves of Hezekiah's actions, Locke argues that God approves of rebellion against one's conquerors and of the breaking of one's promises and covenants that were obtained by force. Yet Locke reminds us that "rebellion" has a pejorative meaning in the Bible. The Bible blames the last three kings of Judah for rebelling against their Babylonian masters in 2 Kings 24:1–2, 8–9, and 20. Ezekiel, in particular, severely blames the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, for rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar and for breaking his covenant with him: "But he rebelled against him in sending his ambassadors into Egypt, that they might give him horses and much people. Shall he prosper? shall he escape that doeth such *things*? or shall he break the covenant, and be delivered?" (Ezekiel 17:15; see also 2 Chronicles 36:13). Locke's observation, however, shows that there is no moral difference between Hezekiah and Zedekiah, except that the former, who was wise enough to rebel after gaining sufficient strength, was successful. The Bible attributes the destruction of the state of Israel to the moral sins of their kings and the people, but Locke's attentive reading of the biblical narrative contradicts this biblical explanation.

CONCLUSION

Our study has shown that while Locke's use of the biblical quotations in the *Second Treatise* sometimes shows agreement between him and the Bible on particular points, every one of them, when carefully read, reveals a more fundamental disagreement between the two positions. It seems that Locke has chosen the passages with the view of showing the areas of disagreement

between his and the biblical position. Accordingly, our finding is compatible only with Hypothesis 2b, that Locke sought to promote his political agenda in showing more intellectually demanding readers the nature of his disagreement with the Bible while cultivating the contrary impression in others.

The quotations occur in chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 16 and in contexts that deal with the foundations of political life. Once Locke secures the foundation of his political theory against the biblical challenge, he develops his understanding of the end, form, and order of civil commonwealth. Biblical quotations are conspicuously absent in the middle sections of the work (chapters 9–15), where the latter theme is developed.

There are relatively few New Testament quotations in the *Second Treatise*. Out of the twenty-three quotations from the Bible, nineteen are from the Old Testament, three from Paul's letters, and one from the Gospels. Waldron notes that this disproportion poses a problem for Dunn's thesis that "the *Two Treatises* is 'saturated with Christian assumption.'"³¹ But if Locke selected the passages in order to address the challenge of the Bible, the focus on the Old Testament becomes intelligible. That work provides a more fundamental challenge to Locke's political theory.³² It implicitly rejects the notion of nature and therefore of natural law (see sections 1–2 above). This rejection is carried over into the New Testament (for instance, in the notion of being born again through God's grace), though Paul also recognizes a sort of natural law (section 2). The Old Testament establishes the rule of the fathers or patriarchy (sections 6–8, 11), and this sentiment is carried over into the New Testament (sections 9, 12). The Old Testament justifies domination of a territory through conquest (sections 3, 13), which positions support Paul's instruction to submit to the powers that be in Romans 13:1. The New Testament, of course, presents its own challenges to Locke's political theory. Its disdain for moneymaking and thus for commercial and financial enterprises (section 5) and its insistence on an almost indissoluble monogamy (section 10) are new, but even these are partly based on premises from the Old Testament (section 4).

Remarkably, two of the quotations from the New Testament are actually the words of a Christian authority quoting the Old Testament imprecisely (Paul in section 9; Jesus in section 10). The Old and New Testaments are not seamless, and Locke uses the discrepancies to drive a wedge between them, only to create an open space for his own position (sections 1, 3). Just as Paul misquotes the commandment to honor one's parents in such a way

as to meet the circumstances of his time, Locke, motivated by an altogether different spirit, reinterprets the Gospels in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and Paul's letters in *An Essay for the Understanding of St. Paul's Epistles by Consulting St. Paul Himself* to make Christianity conformable to a liberal moral and political teaching.

In general, Locke addresses the tension between the Bible and his thought with a typical technique. He often relaxes that tension by using verses from the latter to support his position; yet in the very same places he indicates his disagreement with the Bible and even the reasons for his departure from its position. It seems that he was aware of what psychologists today call attentional blindness and used this insight to place his dangerous thoughts where they are most hidden. He puts his disagreements with the Bible in the very sections in which he appeals to the Bible.³³ He allows the readers who demand reasons to see his reason without inflaming political passions, and even while marshaling political support for the new political order. Accordingly, it appears that Strauss somewhat mischaracterizes Locke's writing when he compares it to the speeches of certain politicians (described by Thomas Babington Macaulay) "who cared little whether their major agreed with their minor, if their major secured two hundred votes, and the conclusion two hundred more."³⁴ Locke indeed was interested in the successful realization of his political order, and he knew that such success required blurring the difference between his radical position and the Christian position, but in his effort to promote a more rational society, he never, as far as I can see, neglects to indicate his reasons for his position. Even when he garners support from the Bible for his position, he does not use sophistical (in the sense of illogical) arguments; they invariably point to a passage in which the Bible speaks against itself. They are little roads that exit the biblical highway.

If Locke's political thought is not ultimately based on Christian principles, it becomes an urgent task to reconstruct his thought without any polemics and without any reliance on inconsistent borrowings from the religious or philosophical tradition. Only in this way can we determine whether his thought can stand on its own true foundations. Such a study would contribute to a better assessment of postmodern doubts about reason and to a more adequate understanding of the relation between liberalism and religion. A religious reading of Locke's thought was a necessity in seventeenth-century England. It may have served as a corrective to the excesses of

emerging democracy at the turn of the nineteenth century. But today such a reading has lost much of its utility. To argue that the foundation of liberalism lies in Protestant Christian teaching is to maintain that only Protestants can be consistent liberals, or at least to privilege Protestantism as the spiritual ground of liberalism.³⁵ For this reason alone, a religious interpretation of Locke is apt to be socially ineffectual. No one understood this better than the man who originated this interpretation: a political theory that rests on a religious position “which most people today (including a great many devout Christians) [find] barely intelligible” cannot be a force in the modern world.³⁶

NOTES

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 11 and 413; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Francis H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 1–10; Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1967), 97–163; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958); Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Hugh Heclo, *Christianity and American Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); Joshua Mitchell, *Not by Reason Alone: Religion, History, and Identity in Early Modern Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Carl Schmitt, *Political Theory*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); David Peddle, *The Religious Origins of American Freedom and Equality: A Response to John Rawls* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2014); Eric Voegelin, review of *On Tyranny*, by Leo Strauss, *Review of Politics* 11 (1949): 241–44.
2. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
3. Ruth Grant, *John Locke's Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 9; Steven Forde, *Locke, Science, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
4. Richard Cox, *Locke on War and Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).
5. Peter Josephson, *The Great Art of Government: Locke's Use of Consent* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002); Steven Menashi, “Cain as His Brother's Keeper: Property Rights and Christian Doctrine in Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*,” *Seton Hall Law Review* 42 (2012): 185–273; Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Michael Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism: On Lockean Political Philosophy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).
6. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 220.
7. John Dunn, *Locke: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 37; Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the “Two Treatises of Government”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 98.
8. Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, Equality: Christian Foundations of John Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); W. M. Spellman, *John Locke and the Problem of Depravity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1–7; Kim Ian Parker, *The Biblical Politics of John Locke* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004).
9. Dunn, *Locke*, 26.

10. Waldron, *God, Locke, Equality*, 6.
11. We have also omitted the three citations that are not quotations (§§24 and 38).
12. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 60.
13. Although Locke knew the Bible in its original languages, his biblical quotations are from the King James translation. Accordingly, I have made this my basic text.
14. Cox, *Locke on War and Peace*, 55.
15. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* §28.
16. Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations Upon the Five Books of Moses* (originally published 1622), note on Genesis 9:6.
17. Waldron, *God, Locke, Equality*, 6.
18. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 81.
19. Ainsworth, *Annotations*, note on Genesis 4:14.
20. See the end of *Second Treatise* §20 and the beginning of §21; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 214–15.
21. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 214 (emphasis added).
22. See John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writings*, ed. Mark Goldie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 49: discussing conflicts between magistrates and their peoples, Locke writes, “You will say then the Magistrate being the stronger will have his Will, and carry his point. *Without doubt*. But the Question is not here concerning the doubtfulness of the Event, but the Rule of Right” (emphasis added).
23. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 4.20.29.
24. Forde, “Natural Law, Theology, and Morality,” 403.
25. Cf. Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 2.28.8.
26. See also the beginning of *Second Treatise* §26.
27. As to the conquest of heaven, consider Locke’s characterization in the *First Treatise* of the men who built the tower of Babel as “a Free People” (§146).
28. Locke does discuss the duty of charity in the *First Treatise* (§§41–43), but as Pangle observes, Locke there interprets charity as a component of justice, as a response to the right of other human beings to preserve themselves (*Spirit of Modern Republicanism*, 144). The result is a charitableness that is extremely limited, as is evident from Locke’s proposal for the reform of the poor laws in Britain.
29. Locke’s formulation is the most stripped down, different from Jesus’s two formulations by one word and from that in Genesis by four.
30. See also Locke, *Essay Concerning Toleration*, 110.
31. Waldron, *God, Locke, Equality*, 188.
32. See also Pangle, *Spirit of Modern Republicanism*, 139.
33. He appears to have used the same technique in his most important reference to Hooker, where he first appeals to this authority to support his thesis about the existence of the state of nature, and he then very plainly indicates that Hooker did not consider the condition of men living outside of political society as a natural one (*Second Treatise* §15).
34. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 207; letter to Voegelin, April 29, 1953, in Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934–1964*, ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).
35. See Greg Forster, *John Locke’s Politics of Moral Consensus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 29. Forster tries to avoid this difficulty by arguing that the foundation of Locke’s teaching is not distinctly Christian but merely religious: “Anyone who believes in some revelation that affirms the preservation of human life as a divine law can be a member of the political community” (29). This, of course, leaves out agnostics and atheists.
36. Dunn, *Locke*, 37.

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CHAPTER 6

Montesquieu's Machiavellian Account of Civil Religion

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Niccolò Machiavelli's influence on Charles de Montesquieu's work has been acknowledged in various ways and by many interpreters. Most famously, Montesquieu comments that Europe had begun to be cured of Machiavellianism, seemingly putting himself at odds with Machiavelli and his legacy.¹ In this case, Machiavellianism refers to the unbridled avarice of princes who would use their political power tyrannically to enrich themselves. Montesquieu stands against Machiavellianism on the side of limited governmental power and the protections of individual liberties and possessions. But the manner in which the tyrannical power of princes was curbed is not free of Machiavelli's influence; that is, letters of exchange made capital and merchants more mobile, forcing monarchs to respect even the property of the perennially vulnerable Jews. The avarice of princes, in other words, kept in check their tyranny.² In order to achieve this, as it turns out, the influence of both Aristotle and Christianity (or, really, Aristotelianism) had to be overcome and that of Machiavelli affirmed. The former two outlawed the fundamental needs of human beings and thus effectively criminalized human nature, and the latter avowed human nature as is. Montesquieu shares Machiavelli's concerns regarding the otherworldliness of Christianity and its alliance with ancient philosophy's perfectionism.

When we turn to Montesquieu's treatment of religion in particular, we note a deep debt to his Florentine predecessor. This is especially the case when examining the related issues of the incompatibility of biblical religion with the political and economic needs of human society, and the broader question of whether religion in general is useful for preserving civic attachment to a common good. Montesquieu follows Machiavelli in complaining about the effects of biblical religion on political life, but there is some dispute regarding Montesquieu's understanding as to whether civil religions are necessary aids for ensuring good citizenship.³ Indeed, there is a similar disagreement regarding whether Machiavelli eschews all religion or, rather, wants to encourage the revival of pagan civil religion in the mold of republican Rome.

Much of this chapter will focus on the Machiavellian echoes in Montesquieu's somewhat neglected account of Rome's political transformation from pagan republic to despotic Christian empire.⁴ This approach has the advantage of highlighting Montesquieu's deep critique of Christianity for politics, while bringing to light his strategies when discussing religion in general. Viewing Machiavelli as a chief inspiration for Montesquieu's approach to the relationship between politics and religion also helps us to better understand the latter's final word on the need for religion, even politically useful religion. Both Machiavelli and Montesquieu offer only qualified praise of Roman paganism when all is considered, and Montesquieu (perhaps Machiavelli too⁵) seems to want to free politics from reliance on religion as such.

Montesquieu's assessment of Rome and its legacy is complicated—as is Machiavelli's. In many respects, including the results of its quest for universal monarchy, Montesquieu wants to displace Rome as the important model that it was for France. Rome organized itself for war, and its successful expansion sowed the seeds of its eventual destruction.⁶ “The Romans, by destroying all the peoples, destroyed themselves; constantly active, striking and violent, they wore themselves out, just as a weapon that is always in use wears out” (*Spirit* 23.20). And all of the prowess and virtue that the Romans displayed in the cause of their expansion amounted to the satisfaction of “five or six monsters” (*Considerations*, 139). Montesquieu's overall treatment of Roman military might no doubt focuses more on its ultimate futility and destructiveness than on the impressiveness of its initial accomplishments, but he provides some significant Machiavellian praise of early Rome as well.

It is when Montesquieu compares early pagan republican Rome with monarchic Christian Rome that he is most complimentary of the former. The ancient Romans are a model of political efficacy, sacrificing all for the welfare of Rome. Their military acumen, combined with their “prudence, wisdom and constancy, and their love of glory and country,” led them to fine displays of human excellence, the likes of which modern men, taken with more mundane commercial and financial concerns, do not appreciate (*Considerations*, 170; *Spirit* 3.3). The role of religion, in particular, contributes a great deal to the political and military successes of the early Romans. Montesquieu comments that Roman religiosity “always formed the nerve of their military discipline.” The Romans, “the most religious people in the world when it came to an oath,” combined civic virtue and religion to best effect (*Considerations*, 27; see also *Spirit* 8.3).⁷ The Roman founding, along with Romulus, “their king and their god,” maintained an aura of eternity and helped offset the possible negative effects of luxury and inequality that are usually the results of an endless series of successful conquests (*Considerations*, 98).

The importance of civil religion to their success is to be understood in light of Montesquieu’s overall depreciation of the perpetual war to which Roman virtue and might were dedicated. In addition to this dark undertone of any praise Montesquieu bestows on Rome, there is also the difficulty of understanding how he conceives of the economy of soul with respect to ancient civic virtue and its alliance with pagan religion. In *Considerations*, the function that the Roman gods serve is to prevent venal selfishness (particularly in the form of conquest booty) from undermining the *esprit de corps* (or collective selfishness) of the city. Montesquieu is vague about the precise nature of the incentive structure that makes this possible, but he elsewhere makes clear that, however this is achieved, it is not by way of the repressiveness of Roman religion. Roman religion, like its Greek counterpart, was “mild and always in accord with nature.” “Great gaiety in the ritual was joined to complete independence in the doctrine.” Montesquieu contrasts classical paganism with Islam and Christianity, which he says are made “solely for the afterlife.”⁸ Interestingly, Machiavelli, who states that the Romans feared breaking an oath much more than the laws, presents the use of pagan civil religion in a far harsher light. The fear greater than that elicited through human punishment was supposed to have more force in persuading men to risk their lives in very dangerous situations. Arguably, the examples

Machiavelli provides to prove that this psychology of supernatural fear works do something very different. Scipio's "naked steel" seems to have sufficed to buck up the spooked Romans, while no amount of religion—however spooky—made up for the Samnite loss of virtue and military preparedness (*Discourses* 1.11.1; 1.15).

The Roman gods were understood to side with the Romans in victory—as long as the Romans propitiated them as prescribed, of course. In the context of the decline of Roman military prowess, Montesquieu takes up the debate between pagans and Christians on the question of whether Christianity is consonant with Roman military and political conquest. In relating the debate between Augustine and various pagan apologists, Montesquieu subtly but firmly comes out on the side of the latter. Augustine judges that Rome's tremendous success as a pagan nation signals that God favored this city even before its Christianization, but he also makes clear that such manifestations of glory and earthly ambitions were paltry compared to what was possible after conversion. If Montesquieu withholds direct judgment while discussing the great controversy between Augustine and detractors of Christianity, he offers his view plainly at a separate juncture in the figure of the French Augustinian Blaise Pascal. Montesquieu reminds the reader that Pascal confirms that a Christian's "true condition" is "sickness," which is compatible with a depreciation of all earthly goods (*Considerations*, 201).⁹ This echoes Machiavelli's biting critique of Christianity, a doctrine that "wishes you to be capable more of suffering than of doing something strong" (*Discourses* 2.2.2).

The second half of Montesquieu's *Considerations* contains a series of savage appraisals of Christian and despotic Rome, and, relatedly, praise for those figures who recommended a return to the values of pagan Rome. Montesquieu praises Julian (designated "the apostate" for his desire to return to paganism) and Valentinian for wanting to reestablish the old penalties for abandoning one's post, which Montesquieu judges would have been good for Roman self-preservation (*Considerations*, 170). Belisarius, Justinian's general and the author of the military advances made during his reign, owed his successes to following the "maxims of the early Romans" (188). In a manner that echoes Machiavelli, Montesquieu praises the bellicosity of the ancient Romans and suggests that he is in agreement with the Florentine regarding the otherworldliness of Christianity.¹⁰

Montesquieu accepts Machiavelli's two-pronged critique of Christianity: its otherworldliness is coupled with the immoderate and counterproductive

ambitions of the clergy. For Machiavelli, the new Romans ruled by way of the moral authority of the church, while most prelates displayed all of the traits that they presented as sins to their flocks. Those who upheld the example of the life of Christ, specifically Saint Francis and Saint Dominic, who renewed the old orders of Christianity, were more to blame than the hypocritical clergy because they upheld the view that God, not men, would punish wrongdoing. It was “evil to say evil of evil,” they taught, and so they gave the world over to those practicing a twisted form of earthly ambition (*Discourses* 3.1.4). The old Romans, on the other hand, maintained the reins of religious power, wielding it for the sake of military and political might. Papirius’s use and abuse of the order of augurs known as the chicken-men offers a lively illustration of this. The chicken-men understood their role: they inspired the Roman forces by assuring them that the gods looked favorably on particular military engagements, even when the signs were not in fact auspicious. Machiavelli praises Papirius both for taking advantage of the false auguries and for ensuring that religious sentiment was affirmed by punishing the chicken-men for lying (1.14).

Machiavelli demonstrates the usefulness of religion controlled by elites for the purposes of furthering the military and political aims of the city—though, as mentioned and as Vickie Sullivan argues, this trend of elite manipulation of the religious sentiment among the many may have led down a troubling path. Montesquieu follows suit, praising the pagan Roman practice of not sparing priests from civil obligations, while blaming the opposite Christian practice of removing ecclesiastics from worldly affairs. He points to the strange paradox that the Roman priests, who had a role in temporal affairs of state and who functioned as citizens with obligations, hardly got involved in politics. On the other hand, Christian ecclesiastics—monks in particular—who were “destined by more particular vows to flee and fear worldly affairs” seized “every occasion to take part in them” (*Considerations*, 206). Montesquieu describes the excesses of religion under the Greek (or Byzantine) empire. As useful as pagan religion was to the Romans, so hazardous was the intolerance of Christianity, which went along with an obsession with doctrinal purity. This, in turn, gave rise to harmful sectarianism and made the art of ruling more about religion than about politics. Montesquieu articulates that the most “vicious source” of what ailed the “Greeks” was that they did not know the “limits of ecclesiastical and secular power” (210).¹¹

The pagan Romans, in contrast, understood these limits. Montesquieu discusses the restoration of Cicero's house to him as an example of republican Rome's superior appreciation of the appropriate spheres of religion and politics. Having had his home confiscated by rivals (who used religion cynically to bring him down), it is returned to him as a result of the proper ordering of religious and political matters (*Considerations*, 210–11). One has the sense that Montesquieu, like Machiavelli, may suspect all purveyors of religion to have their own reasons for utilizing the force of belief. This may even include Constantine, the first emperor to convert to Christianity. Montesquieu brings up the rumors that Constantine was not overcome with Christian faith when he converted but rather found solace in a religion that forgave his murderous past as opposed to paganism. Unlike Christianity, paganism granted no quarter to murderers of close relatives and labeled these sorts of crimes inexpiable stains (*Spirit* 24.13). The strange combination of Christian repression and laxity provided solace to the rapacious power-hungry prince. While Christianity forgave crimes that led to political sedition and punished what was politically irrelevant, the pagan Romans demonstrated their superiority in their "choice of the circumstances in which they did good and evil things" (22.12).

Montesquieu's critique of the Christian Roman empire is nowhere more searing than with respect to the issue of religious toleration. Republican Rome was tolerant in the sense that it did not seek to impose the Roman religion. Roman religion was a privilege, and Roman gods were instruments of Roman conquest. The exclusivity of Christian monotheism, on the other hand, drove the Romans under this banner to proselytize: "Just as the old Romans strengthened their empire by permitting every kind of religion in it, so was it subsequently reduced to nothing by amputating, one after the other, the sects which were not dominant" (*Considerations*, 190–91). Montesquieu singles out Justinian's misguided and corrupt rule, sparing not even a positive thought for his famous codification of Roman law. His "misconduct, his prodigality, harassment and plundering, his passion for building, changing and reforming, his inconstancy in his design, his severity and weakness in reign," all made for disastrous rule and empty victories that cost the empire real strength (188). In destroying "sects," Justinian often destroyed entire nations: "He believed he had increased the number of faithful; he had only diminished the number of men" (191).

One might wish to argue that Montesquieu came to have a greater appreciation for Christian effects on political life, and especially on foreign relations, in *The Spirit of Laws*. After all, Montesquieu claims that the modern right of nations is superior to that of the ancients because of “contemporary reasoning, to the religion of the present day, to our philosophy, and to our mores” (*Spirit* 10.3). Yet having paid modernity this compliment, he immediately undermines it by pointing out that “our” public law justifies harsh practices such as the enslavement or extermination of conquered peoples. He also points out that the so-called modern right of nations is entangled with Roman law—although it seems as if forgetting (rather than heeding) the lessons of early Rome is the problem. As Montesquieu points out, the pagan Romans were smart enough to be content with obedience, regardless of the content of the laws (*Considerations*, 75; *Spirit* 10.17). Montesquieu clearly, if subtly, points out that Justinian’s legacy of “bigoted” Christian conquest took on a modern form in the Spanish conquest of the Americas (*Considerations*, 203). What gentleness Christians practiced among themselves by abolishing slavery among Christian nations was not extended to “heathens” (*Spirit* 15.3, 7, 8).

Montesquieu, again following Machiavellian principles, teaches that the “effectual truth” of Christianity’s call for gentleness is the opposite, which is to say that while Christianity may preach gentleness and peace, its implementation is a different matter. Tongue in cheek, Montesquieu muses about how wonderful it would have been if Mexico and Peru had received true Christianity rather than the “raging superstition” that underwrote the Conquista (*Spirit* 10.4). Nowhere does Montesquieu provide an example of the gentling effects of Christianity in international relations, probably because the actual effects of Christianity did not accord with its doctrine of peace and love. In principle, slavery was a universally unjustifiable practice according to Christian doctrine. In practice, Christians did not apply the prohibition against slavery when inconvenient. In *Considerations*, we learn that at its very inception the prohibition against the enslavement of fellow Christians came about as a result of facing an equally “fanatical” army in the “Mohammedans” who were at war with the Byzantines (*Considerations*, 197). In other words, it was born of an effort to distinguish between Christians and non-Christians, not as Christian recognition of common humanity.

An even uglier set of motives for the ostensibly high-minded antislavery position is identified in the *Persian Letters*. Usbek writes to Rhedi as

follows: "Long ago Christian princes set free all of the slaves in their states because, they said, Christianity makes all men equal. It is true that this act of religion was very useful to them: through this they lessened that power of the lords by which the lords maintained a grip upon the lower class. They afterward made conquests in some countries where they saw that it was to their advantage to have slaves. They permitted the buying and selling of them, forgetting the principle of religion that touched them so much."¹²

This letter makes reference to the convenient exceptions to the slavery prohibition as well as to the political advantages kings gained by undermining the nobility through the principle of equality. Perhaps Montesquieu does not agree with Usbek here; after all, the Persian is hardly a spokesman for Montesquieu in many obvious respects, including his domestic despotism. Still, this indictment of the origins and (mis)use of the Christian prohibition against slavery fits testimony that Montesquieu provides in his own name. In *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu points out that the strange habits of the indigenous peoples of the Americas (including their beard fashion and tobacco use) seemed to exclude them from humanity as such (15.3). He also reports that Louis XIII got over a bad conscience for having enslaved Africans in the French colonies once he was assured that the enslavement was a means to the Africans' conversion (10.4). Whatever crisis of conscience the French king suffered was not sufficient to stop engaging in the international slave trade and the practice of chattel slavery for the sake of profiting from labor-intensive sugar plantations in the Antilles. Rather than not engage in slavery, he settled for the conversion of slaves to Christianity—which, predictably, had no negative financial consequences for France, along the lines that abandoning slavery in the colonies would have had.

Christianity, far from softening the effects of conquest, rather provided an element of zealotry that made the Spanish harsher. In his *Pensées*, Montesquieu notes that the papal legitimation of the conquest (charging the inhabitants of the Americas with idolatry) emboldened the Spanish leaders to give no quarter: "By a great and unprecedented flourish, he [Cortez] claims as his mission the abolition of the dominant religion. In saying repeatedly that he seeks peace, what he is after is a conquest without resistance."¹³ In another example, Montesquieu portrays the unfairness of the manner in which the king of the Incas, the Inca Athualpa, was treated by Pizarro and the Europeans (*Spirit* 26.22). The Spanish reneged on an agreement with him whereby he had turned himself over to them, declaring him guilty by

their laws (his use of capital punishment, polygamy, etc.). Montesquieu insists that the Inca Athualpa was subject not to the laws of the conquering Europeans, but to the law of nations (thus denying the claims of Christianity to universality). He highlights the hypocrisy of the Christian Europeans: they recognized the Inca leader as a legitimate prince with whom to make an agreement in the first place but then judged him illegitimate based on religious norms he had not accepted.

Montesquieu follows Machiavelli in preferring pagan Rome to Christian Rome, but, based on the comparison developed so far, there is a meaningful distinction between the two. Montesquieu seems more troubled by the brutality that accompanied the Christian message of peace, while Machiavelli focuses on the weakness that Christianity encourages in modernity—with the dividedness of Italy serving as an emblem of this political limpness. Both authors question the gentleness of Christianity and its effects, but Machiavelli does so in the name of cruelty (if well used) and Montesquieu for the sake of gentle mores. This important difference between the two philosophers is complicated and nuanced in ways that can only be gestured toward in this short chapter. But we can say that Montesquieu understands Christianity's incursion into politics as a problem in a manner that mirrors Machiavelli's concerns. This is so not only in the case of Roman military success but also in other respects.

One important example of this is Montesquieu's view on what he (wrongly) thought was a population crisis in modern Europe. Montesquieu places the blame for this squarely on Christian shoulders. Christianity's lack of concern with encouraging a hospitable environment for the propagation of the species—by prohibiting divorce and by encouraging celibacy as an aspect of religious devotion, among other problems—is a symptom of its damaging otherworldliness (*Letters* 116–17; *Spirit* 23.21). Indeed, in a pointedly Machiavellian turn, Montesquieu praises Henry VIII for brutally destroying monastic life in England, thus making it possible to institute norms and practices that favored industriousness and commerce rather than the laziness that endured as a consequence of monastic hospitality (*Spirit* 23.29). Tyrannical cruelty is sometimes needed to overturn old modes and orders, even according to Montesquieu. Still, it seems as if Machiavelli and Montesquieu might have envisioned different futures and different solutions to the problems brought on by Christianity. Montesquieu less ambiguously than Machiavelli moves away from the Roman examples and embraces

modern political models, whether reformed French monarchy or English commercial republicanism. He identifies the roots of liberty for modern European states—both France and England—in the forests of Germany or, less poetically, derived from the Franks and the Germanic Gothic tradition. Though Machiavelli leans more heavily on the pagan Roman model and is cagier about where a post-Christian future leads, both philosophers identify aspects of Rome's very successes as complicit in the rise of Christianity and the concomitant languishing of earthly human needs. In other words, Machiavelli's own analysis forces the reader to wonder about the links between pagan and Christian Rome, and about the wisdom of ceaseless empire-building that goes beyond Italian borders.

What Machiavelli's analysis of the two Romes provokes, at the very least, is an engagement with the question of their relative worth as well as the issue of what transpired to change one into the other—and, of course, the related question of what comes next. Montesquieu's most important characterization of the patriotism that undergirds ancient republicanism, which is the political virtue that serves as the spring of republicanism, provides a link between the fanaticism of ancient republican patriotism and the perfectionism of Christianity. In *The Spirit of Laws*, he describes virtue as a passion for one's country that is hard won through convention and education. Although he occasionally praises the great-souled ancient citizen and what he can achieve, the overall tenor of his presentation of virtue or patriotism is of a painful act of self-renunciation. In a famous comment that emphasizes the harshness and unpleasantness of the life of the ancient citizen constrained by virtue, he assimilates the ancient citizen and the Christian monk: both of them come to love the orders that afflict them (*Spirit* 5.2). Just as Montesquieu's presentation of ancient citizenship is not always negative, it is also not always consistent with this painful privation of private interests or asceticism. In *Considerations*, Roman valor and courage—which he tells us formed the core of Roman virtue—do not come to sight as painful or as a product of self-renunciation in favor of love of city. At one point, he even describes the virtue that is a result of physical resilience as a consciousness of one's strength (*Considerations*, 36). In the Roman case, the demonstration of virtue comes to sight as a psychologically satisfying melding of private and public interest.

What the two presentations have in common is a denial that true self-overcoming or transcendence is at the bottom of virtue-seeking. Virtue depends on the existence of very specific circumstances and is compromised

whenever these conditions cease to obtain. Virtue is both the condition for and the result of laws that distribute property equally and prevent the accumulation of wealth (*Spirit* 5.5, 7; 7.2). When particular ambitions are deprived of outlets, citizens seek greatness on behalf of the homeland, and when opportunities for satisfying personal ambitions reassert themselves, so does the desire to pursue these. It is not the province of the best among the people—such as a Pericles among the Athenians—but rather a passion of which all men are capable. While in *The Spirit of Laws* virtue is depicted in somewhat abstract terms, the picture of Rome and the virtue of its citizens that Montesquieu develops in *Considerations* helps illustrate some of the consequences of his presentation.

For all of his respect for Roman greatness, Montesquieu describes the “eternal” city’s rise to power and the virtue of its citizens as a by-product of the city’s institutions—many of which were not simply admirable. In a way, there was nothing particularly special about how Romans loved glory and had contempt for death: this was true of the Gauls and of primitive peoples in general (*Considerations*, 43). Rome was not preordained, as Augustine claimed, for greatness; it did not have a date with destiny. It pursued war, as all barbaric peoples do, to obtain citizens, wives, and land (24). Some of its institutions were extraordinary, and the combination of its domestic class tensions and the ambitions and short terms of the consuls all pointed to expansionist foreign policies. The continuous war-making that defined Rome led the Romans to prize victory over peace. “Since they were always exposed to the most frightful acts of vengeance, constancy and valor became necessary to them. And among them these virtues could not be distinguished from the love of oneself, of one’s family, of one’s country, and of all that is most dear to men” (28).

Virtue, in other words, is political rather than moral, and the overall results of virtue politics are questionable at best. It does not accord with or point toward human excellence. Patriotic virtue (which is how Montesquieu defines virtue as such) is redirected selfishness, not altruism or a rational preference for a common good. It is instrumental to the maintenance of a particular sort of government or regime, which Montesquieu explains is unsustainable in a number of ways. His reconfiguration of virtue reminds us of Machiavelli’s prior realignment of virtue (retitled *virtú*) with political efficacy—as opposed to Christian or Aristotelian principles of virtue, both of which were renamed “vice” if they failed to accord with

successful acquisitiveness (*The Prince* 15). Machiavelli aimed to reclaim “virtue” for political life rather than otherworldly and perfectionistic goals that oppressed and diminished human drives. Montesquieu, on the other hand, by showing virtue as a difficult passion that is hard won and leads to nothing high, robs it of even more luster. Both authors reject the possibility of overcoming one’s desire for self-preservation and object to moralizing against earthly human needs. In a poignant statement, Montesquieu writes that religion should accord with the fact that men are made to “preserve, feed and clothe themselves” rather than to occupy them with overly “contemplative matters” (*Spirit* 24.11). He not only assimilates monkish asceticism with the passion of loving one’s country or “virtue,” but he also alludes to a kinship between the latter and ancient philosophy. Montesquieu distorts Plato by making him into an architect of and advocate for republican virtue and implies that both republican virtue and the philosophical trumpeting of transcendental virtue render man savage—and ultimately have something to do with the advent of Christianity (4.8, 7.16, 8.11). This nexus of political, philosophical, and religious demands for moral purity leads to the perversion and denial of important and legitimate human needs.

There is cruelty in ignoring or prohibiting human needs, and also—often enough—it is futile. Commerce does not disappear because Christianity and Aristotelianism repudiate it, nor does the prohibition against divorce force permanent monogamy. In the first case, as we have already mentioned, one criminalizes decent and necessary enterprises (while also using and abusing a vulnerable religious minority who carry out the moneymaking tasks of society), and, in the second case, one causes the indecent rise in prostitution, which in fact is bad for society. “A man disgusted before long with an eternal wife will deliver himself to prostitutes—shameful commerce, so contrary to society, which, without fulfilling the object of marriage, represents at most the pleasures of it” (*Letters* 116). But the question arises—as it does when considering the many ways in which Machiavelli also debunks the possibility of transcendence—as to why Christianity was successful. If human beings use religion hypocritically or disingenuously, then what is the attraction to self-negating, difficult religions such as Christianity? Even when the Germans defeated the Christian Romans, they bowed down to the more repressive religion of the conquered.

According to Montesquieu, while we are “exceedingly drawn to idolatry” and repulsed by spiritual ideals, we are very attached to religions in which we

worship a “spiritual being.” We overcome our natural attraction to idolatrous religions by way of the satisfaction we feel in being more enlightened than the “coarse peoples” who are so-called idolaters: “It is a happy feeling that comes, in part, from the satisfaction we find in ourselves for having been intelligent enough to have chosen a religion that withdraws divinity from the humiliation in which others have placed it” (*Spirit* 25.2).¹⁴ Pride is man’s greatest sin according to Christianity, but, according to Montesquieu, it is at the root of our belief in an unfathomable, demanding, and yet loving God. This recalls Montesquieu’s assessment of religion as such: “By the nature of human understanding we love in religion everything that presumes an effort, just as on the subject of morality, we love in theory all that has the character of severity” (25.4). Insofar as Christianity is demanding, speculative, and severe, it appeals to our pride and accords with the principles of religion as such. Paganism, which “was mild and always in accord with nature,” as we will recall, failed to inspire the devotion inspired by religions that were more severe and demanding.

The civil religions of the pagans helped inspire great feats but were vulnerable to displacement by demanding and severe religions. In addition to this dynamic, the successful warmongering of ancient cities well equipped with virtue led to the defeat of the free institutions that made war on such a scale possible in the first place. One of the specific ways in which Christianity made incursions into Rome was prepared by the installation of non-Roman generals who brought their foreign gods into Rome. Rome’s initial success depended on openness to foreign innovations in matters of war, tolerance of various gods outside of Rome, and insistence on the supremacy of Roman gods within Rome. The military successes of the Romans meant empire, which, in turn, implied various universalizing trends that threatened the useful mix of chauvinism and toleration that gave pagan Rome its edge. Various universal philosophies started to take hold (from Epicureanism to Stoicism), and Christianity, which mixed together extravagant promises for eternal life with a severity that mirrored the manly Stoicism that preceded it, was the most successful.

At one point, Montesquieu states that there is no better guarantor of good citizenship than a good religion (*Spirit* 24.1, 2, 8). This claim, and the manner in which he develops it, are reminiscent of Machiavelli’s praise of Numa and the way in which he reneges on it. “As the observance of the divine cult is the cause of the greatness of republics, so disdain for it is the

cause of their ruin" (*Discourses* 1.11.4). Just as Machiavelli overturns this judgment, so does Montesquieu's evidence for his similar claim undermine his praise of religion. The positive political impact of Christianity, which Montesquieu disingenuously claims is good for politics in book 24 of *The Spirit of Laws*, is limited to the modest goal of the moderation of despots.¹⁵ Even civic-minded Stoicism, for which Montesquieu has kinder words, does little more than temper or guide the few decent emperors of Rome. Montesquieu espouses the general principle that both religion and civil laws "should aim principally to make good citizens of men" and should compensate for each other when one falls short. In this context, he canvases various religions and a variety of times and locations, and, interestingly, he provides no example in which religion comes to the aid of errant civil laws (12.29, 5.14).¹⁶ There are, however, examples of bad religious doctrines the effects of which are rectified by civil law. One example in particular stands out. In Japan, where religion offers no future rewards or punishments, the civil laws step in and successfully deal with the problem by instituting earthly rewards and punishments. If this is indeed sufficient, then it means that supernatural or eternal religious sanctions and rewards are in fact unnecessary; earthly rewards and punishments will do.

In light of this deep engagement with Machiavelli's thoughts on religion, with particular attention to the Roman example, Montesquieu's preference for religious toleration may reflect his agreement with Machiavelli that religion in all of its forms may be more of a hindrance to healthy political life than an aid. His overall prescription for dealing with religious controversy and the ongoing sectarianism that was a facet of Christianity since its inception comes from his observation that religion is weakened with inducements that make men forget it (*Spirit* 25.12). Montesquieu ultimately aims to make men indifferent to religion, which he seems to think is possible in light of the English example. He praises English toleration since the Glorious Revolution and muses that if citizens are led by their own "enlightenment" or "fantasies" then the outcomes would be that "everyone would be very indifferent to all sorts of religion of whatever kind, in which case everyone would tend to embrace the dominant religion, or that one would be zealous for religion in general, in which case sects would multiply" (19.27). Montesquieu argues that "when one is master of the state's accepting a new religion, or not accepting it, it must not be established; when it is established, it must be tolerated" (25.10). In both cases, the aim seems to be not to incite the

populace into defending the precepts of one sect or another but, at most, to become fervent in the service of the freedom of religion. The end result may very well be to replicate the English case, where they are lukewarm with respect to religion and where the clergy have no special privileges and do not enjoy particular regard. Whether or not Machiavelli would have agreed with Montesquieu's specific prescriptions, it seems clear that he helped guide the Frenchman's attempts to affirm political life as the realm of earthly preservation and liberty.

NOTES

1. Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 21.20. All citations of this work (hereafter *Spirit*) refer to this translation; numerals indicate book and chapter.

2. Randal Hendrickson, "Montesquieu's (Anti-)Machiavellianism: Ordinary Acquisitiveness in *The Spirit of Laws*," *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 385–96; see especially 385–87 for a comprehensive account of the literature linking Montesquieu to Machiavelli, and see in toto for a very competent argument regarding the important ways in which Machiavelli's support for acquisitiveness finds its way into Montesquieu's argument in favor of commerce and other forms of "ordinary acquisitiveness."

3. The scholarly debate tends to be around whether Montesquieu is a proponent of natural law, and whether his defense of religious toleration is meant to maintain the purportedly good effects of Christianity and stamp out the malignant ones. For excellent accounts of the role of natural law in Montesquieu's work, see David Lowenthal, "Book I of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 2 (1959): 485–98; and Stuart Warner, "Montesquieu's Prelude: An Interpretation of Book I of *The Spirit of the Laws*," in *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Syetozar Minkov (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006), 161–88. Thomas Pangle makes the seminal case for Montesquieu's secularism in *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on "The Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University

of Chicago Press, 1973). Rebecca Kingston offers a contrary view in "Montesquieu on Religion and on the Question of Toleration," in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics*, ed. David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 375–408.

4. See Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli's Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 102–17; Sullivan provides both her persuasive account of Machiavelli's mixed appraisal of pagan Rome, and a survey of the opposing literature. See also Nathan Tarcov, "Machiavelli's Critique of Religion," *Social Research* 81, no. 1 (2014): 193–216.

5. By no means can this be established in this short chapter, especially as it focuses on Montesquieu's teaching, but consider the way in which Machiavelli rescinds his praise of Numa. See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. and ed. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1.11.2 and 1.19.4. All citations of *Discourses* refer to this translation and edition and indicate book, chapter, and section.

6. Montesquieu, *Spirit* 2.2; 10.13, 17; 21.14; 23.19, 20; Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, trans. and ed. David Lowenthal (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 138. All citations of *Considerations* refer to this translation and edition and indicate pages.

7. Compare with Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.11.1.

8. Charles de Montesquieu, *Pensées, le Spicilège*, ed. Louis Degraives (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1991), 1606.
9. Douglas Dries, "The Displacement of Christian Historiography in Montesquieu's Book on the Romans," in *Piety and Humanity: Essays on Religion and Early Modern Political Philosophy*, ed. Douglas Kries (Lanham, Md.: Rowan & Littlefield, 1997), 245–46.
10. E.g., Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.pr.2; 2.2.2; *The Prince* 3.
11. See Diana J. Schaub, "Women, Christianity, and the Moderns in Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Romans*," in *The Pious Sex*, ed. Andrea Radasanu (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010), 158.
12. Charles de Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. Stuart D. Warner and Stéphane Douard (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2017), letter 75, "Usbek to Rhedi." All citations of *Persian Letters* (hereafter *Letters*) refer to this translation and provide letter number.
13. Montesquieu, *Pensées*, 1268; my translation.
14. As Diana Schaub puts it, "Vis-à-vis idolaters, we pride ourselves on our choosiness; vis-à-vis other monotheists, we pride ourselves on our chosenness"; Diana J. Schaub, "Of Believers and Barbarians," in *Early Modern Skepticism and the Origins of Toleration*, ed. Alan Levine (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 1999), 226.
15. On Montesquieu's complicated rhetorical strategies dealing with the appropriateness of Christianity for politics, see Robert Bartlett, "On the Politics of Faith and Reason: The Project of Enlightenment in Pierre Bayle and Montesquieu," *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 1 (2001): 1–28. Pangle offers the seminal account of Montesquieu's view of the incompatibility of Christianity and citizenship in *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, 251–52, 254.
16. See also Andrea Radasanu, "Montesquieu and the Spirit of Secularism: Books 24 and 25 of *The Spirit of the Laws*," in *Enlightenment and Secularism: Essays on the Mobilization of Reason*, ed. Christopher Nadon (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 175–88.

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Montesquieu and Christianity in the American Project

The Moderate Spirit of Religious Liberty

PAUL CARRESE

America still is largely exceptional among the liberal democracies for the balance it holds in both law and politics between two principles that, Alexis de Tocqueville noted, conflict in most polities—“the spirit of liberty” and “the spirit of religion.” Perhaps no other polity reconciles political and religious liberty with respect for transcendent sources of truth, morality, and liberty itself.¹ Since many of the modern philosophers prior to Tocqueville deemed religion and particularly Christianity a threat to philosophical freedom, to liberation of human potential, and to political liberty, one wonders whether such praise for America’s balance draws upon predecessors. To understand both America and modern philosophy we need to rediscover Charles de Montesquieu as one of Tocqueville’s sources here, as the great advocate of philosophical and political moderation, friendlier to religion than any of the great moderns from Niccolò Machiavelli to John Locke.

It is striking that Tocqueville selects this balance, or moderation, as the defining “point of departure” for America, the key to understanding its political institutions, political culture, and broader social and moral culture. This principle of moderation does not explain everything about America, however; Tocqueville regularly warns in *Democracy in America* that it is threatened by modern philosophy and democratic mores—and paradoxically, by elements of Protestantism itself. The remainder of *Democracy* tries

to bolster that founding balance, that exceptional blending of liberty and religion, but also to further moderate or elevate it. It is at once a defining feature of America and a principle that America and modern liberal democracy must enliven and adapt to sustain the political order. This moderation about religion and politics is, in Tocquevillean philosophy, a delicately calibrated insight into a complex phenomenon. Both as an insight and in practice it represents an equipoise, full of tension. These qualities suggest that Tocqueville drew upon Charles de Montesquieu more than Blaise Pascal in discerning the salutary balance of liberty and religion, and upon these two more than Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu advocated both a philosophical mode and a political regime defined by avoidance of extremes, thus by balance and equipoise on a higher middle ground.

It is acceptable, albeit not uncontroversial, to argue that Tocqueville does not adopt a “civil religion” doctrine in which religion is subservient to, and tolerated only as useful to, the state and politics—a milder version of the Erastianism of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. One can further argue that he does not fully accept a Lockean separation of religious and political authority, certainly not its selective toleration. Separationism and selective toleration are not as hostile to religion or metaphysical thinking as are the views of Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but they are cold to religion, viewing it as a problem for liberalism to manage.² Tocqueville admires America’s mutually respectful accommodation between religion and political liberty because it is not a *modus vivendi* or mere pragmatism but is constitutive of the political order—an order that he praises as not perfect but better and more promising than anything else in the world. It is more controversial among scholars, however, to argue that the roots of Tocqueville’s admiration for such balance or moderation about reason and revelation lie in Montesquieu and the openness to religion, and to classical and medieval thought, that he provided by moderating the Enlightenment.

To understand America and its influence on modern liberal democracy we need to question the rendition of Montesquieu as a subtle but radical critic of religion. Tocqueville’s view of a balance between religion and liberty, fruitful for both city and soul, rests in part upon his admiration for Pascal’s turn from modern rationalism to metaphysics and religion; however, the larger constitutional form as well as the balanced philosophical spirit stem

from Montesquieu. Many Montesquieu scholars disagree, especially those who highlight the Catholic critics of putatively antitheological views in *The Spirit of Laws*. To this school, his contemporary critics expose his subtle version of Lockean separationism and anticlericalism; to some scholars he is even an exquisitely subtle Machiavellian and Spinozist on religion. Montesquieu rejected that view; curiously enough, the Catholic priest who a century later, in 1861, took up Tocqueville's chair in the French Academy upon the latter's death also argued that Montesquieu was sympathetic to religion. The Dominican theologian Henri-Dominique Lacordaire declared *The Spirit of Laws* "the most beautiful defense of Christianity in the eighteenth century."³

A larger argument, for another time, is that Montesquieu's presence in the American mind from the 1750s informs not only the constitutionalism of the 1780s and 1790s but also the arguments for independence, including elements of the Declaration of Independence. The argument of this chapter is that his philosophy also shapes the Puritan, Anglican, and more broadly Protestant conceptions from the 1750s onward about blending liberty and religious belief in a new American order. Tocqueville later draws upon Montesquieu's principle of balancing and reconciling diverse views, and on the American practice (itself informed by Montesquieu) of forging an alloy of views. It is true that Tocqueville fashions his own way of praising yet refining the American model, and that he deepens Montesquieu's accommodation of liberty and religion by discerning a greater need to buttress and elevate religious, metaphysical beliefs in a post-French Revolution era of scientific and democratic materialism. Nonetheless the moderation and accommodation proposed by Montesquieu laid the foundation, philosophically and politically, for the balance Tocqueville perceives in America, and for his proposed recalibration.

SEEKING THE ROOTS OF LIBERAL EXCEPTIONALISM IN RELIGION

One fact of the twenty-first-century world is that the American balance of religion and liberty is less exceptional than when Tocqueville observed it in the 1830s, given changes both in America and globally. Other peoples and states have developed some degree of equilibrium between liberal freedom and the public (as well as private) importance of religious faith, albeit including continuing controversy and tensions, even violence; examples

might include India, South Korea, Indonesia, and, once though perhaps not any longer, Turkey. On the other hand, America is less religious than it was in Tocqueville's era. Nonetheless, liberal exceptionalism in religion persists: religious belief is more publicly and culturally prominent in America than in any other advanced liberal democracy, and there is also more religious liberty in America than in states with a deeply religious culture.⁴ This balance has been neither static nor tranquil in America, but it is a feat of moderation in contrast to the extremes prevalent under many governments. Many peoples live under enforced religious orthodoxy, or under an enforced secularism that ranges from China's oppression to the privatizing of religion under France's *laicism*. Indeed, the American moderation between these potential extremes in human nature and politics is evident in part in the very dynamism of and debates about this equilibrium, as we alternate between moments of secularism and religiosity in politics, the courts, or academic debate.

As with any analysis of ethics or politics that seeks truth by discerning moderation between poles, it is crucial to define, and ground, the extremes and the spectrum between them. In this Aristotelian and Montesquieuan spirit, a provisional framing of legal and academic debates on religion and politics in America can note the rival sets of philosophers, theologians, and founding statesmen typically cited to buttress two rival poles. At issue here as well is the meaning of liberal exceptionalism in religion. Is it the separation of religion and philosophy demanded by the radical Enlightenment (itself echoing Epicurus, Lucretius, and Machiavelli among earlier philosophers); or the domination of reason and republicanism by religion, in America as a Christian nation; or the balance and mutual accommodation between religion, philosophy, and liberty? In the American debate, one school cites a lineage stemming from Spinoza, Hobbes, and Locke that informs James Madison and Thomas Jefferson to support a separationist or secularist view. This defines America as a modern liberal regime with core principles of individual autonomy and security, and a public sphere defined by secular reason and modern science. The opposing school cites a lineage from Martin Luther and John Calvin to the Puritans and such founders as Reverend John Witherspoon, teacher of and correspondent with James Madison and George Washington. This view supports a claim that America was founded as a Christian, or Protestant republican, nation. The argument proposed here is that neither pole captures the moderate, balanced view held by most

founders from the 1770s to the 1790s, which is embedded in the complex clauses on religion and politics in America's three main founding documents. This is because neither pole quite explains how its fundamental lens, whether Lockeanism or Protestantism, is disposed to develop an amalgam or alloy of these philosophical and religious elements.

If Montesquieu proposed a philosophy of moderation that reconciles seemingly rival principles, and this was fundamentally influential for the founders, then we must examine his views of religion as a model for the American project.⁵ Certain philosophical schools declare such moderation to be, by a priori standards, an incoherent muddle. They would not be inclined to find a coherent equilibrium in the American harmonizing of religion and politics, but they would reduce the phenomenon to one dominant principle or the other. This, however, does not make sense of the consistent complexity and balance of the American mind—ranging from invocations of “the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God” and the “protection of Divine Providence” in the Declaration of Independence (1776) to the insistence in the Northwest Ordinance of 1789 (reauthorized in 1789 under the Constitution) on “civil and religious liberty” and public education in “religion, morality, and knowledge” to the ban on religious tests for office but also the special status of Sundays in the Constitution (1787) to the religious clauses on nonestablishment but also free exercise in the Bill of Rights (1789) to the persistent appeals in every major public writing by the Founding Father George Washington both to rights and biblical providence as guiding principles and to particular Christian beliefs and virtues. It is more plausible to find a political and philosophical moderation in this complex blend of views than to find either dominance by any one principle or a mere cacophony forged for the utility of the moment.⁶

The often-neglected lineage undergirding this principled moderation stems from Montesquieu and shapes the founder Washington; it further extends to Montesquieu’s heir Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* comprehends *The Federalist* and Anti-Federalist writings to capture the spirit of America’s political founding. Awareness of the philosophical and constitutionalist pedigree of the moderate view on religion and politics illuminates some of the legal, political, and academic debates on religion and politics that continue in American life and other liberal democracies today. Such a recovery can promote a moderate disposition among rival arguments and advocates by revealing that the perpetuation of these

disputes itself reflects the balance between extremes sought by America's founders. Apart from the classic common law of England, which was a main source for American political and legal thought, Montesquieu is the clearest source of a principle of moderation that informs our constitutional reasoning on religion and politics.⁷ Explaining this requires grappling with the carefully calibrated balance of religion and liberalism in his complex political philosophy. No account of the fundamental issue—of whether religious liberty requires, as separationism or secularism believes, that political liberty and religious faith are such adversaries that liberty requires protection from faith—is complete without seriously addressing Montesquieu's views and influence.

MONTESQUIEU'S DELINEATION OF MODERATION, LIBERTY, AND RELIGION

The American founders cited Montesquieu more than any other philosopher of the radical Enlightenment (Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau) during the two decades of writing a new constitution and bill of rights, so the relative scholarly neglect of his work is unfortunate.⁸ A further complication is that many recent analyses of religion in *The Spirit of Laws* argue that Montesquieu subtly deepens the anticlerical rationalism of Machiavelli or Locke. Beneath a veneer of accommodation of faith he emphasizes not just toleration but the privatization of religion.⁹ The boldest analysis argues that he cunningly advocates a radical Enlightenment vision of modernity that sets religion on a path to destruction, with politics guided by only the materialist lights of science and commerce.¹⁰ An alternative analysis recapitulates a more traditional view of Montesquieu as a liberal Christian or deist who rejects a strict separation of church and state, while nonetheless being a functionalist who subordinates faith to its utility for politics.¹¹ The strength of this latter approach is an awareness of Montesquieu's appreciation of complexity in human action and thought, even if this view still places a narrow emphasis on his utilitarian praise for Christianity as a check on power. This range of views highlights a perennial difficulty in approaching Montesquieu's philosophy, that to understand him on any topic presupposes an account of the principle of philosophical moderation or equilibrium informing *The Spirit of Laws*. Because little scholarship adequately addresses his declaration that moderation is the key to his masterwork,¹² our understanding of his work and

influence remains incomplete. Absent this guiding principle, several scholars construe passages on religion in *The Spirit of Laws* as antireligious when Montesquieu instead is criticizing an extreme and urging a middle ground warranted either by religious belief or reason. Passages more supportive of religion are overlooked; for example, almost no scholars try to make sense of (or even notice) Montesquieu's unqualified praise in *The Spirit of Laws* for William Penn's project to establish a Christian republic based upon peace, tolerance, and commerce (4.6).

The scholarly weight, however, is shifting, since a body of recent work acknowledges Montesquieu's reconciliation of liberalism and religious belief—noting his criticism of theological and theocratic fanaticism but also his praise for the role of religious belief in private life and in a moderate politics, as well as his critique of rationalism as itself extreme.¹³ The further argument of this chapter is that Montesquieu guardedly affirms religious belief, as well as the rational perception of an ordered cosmos supporting natural right and moderate politics.¹⁴ This is the complex political philosophy that the American founding and later Tocqueville developed toward a still more affirmative view of the balance between liberty and religion, more generally between reason and revelation. This reading agrees that Montesquieu is a modern and liberal who, compared to Thomas Aquinas or Aristotle, obviously diminishes the role of metaphysical thought and religious aspiration in political philosophy, but it insists that his criticism of the radical Enlightenment and rationalism—his moderating of modern philosophy—informs a mildly sympathetic view of religion and especially Christianity, to include denunciation of any fanaticism and cruelty.

Moderation encapsulates the philosophical complexity Montesquieu thought necessary to comprehend reality, as well as his disposition to avoid extremes in politics. This approach is somewhat evident in his two earlier works, the philosophical novel *Persian Letters* and the philosophical history *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, but is fully developed only in *The Spirit of Laws*. Moreover, just as he moderates his views of republicanism and the Romans from *Considerations* to *The Spirit of Laws*, he moderates his skepticism about religion in *Letters* and *Considerations* with a more balanced view in his masterwork. In *The Spirit of Laws* he propounds both a method and a substance defined by balance and reconciliation of rival principles. He seeks to advance modern liberalism by restoring elements of classical and medieval philosophy that

appreciate the multifarious reality of humanity and politics. Near the end of this large work he finally announces his guiding principle: “I say it, and it seems to me I have brought forth this work only to prove it: the spirit of moderation ought to be that of the legislator; the political good, like the moral good, is always found between two limits” (*Spirit* 29.1). The hero of this epic journey of political philosophizing is, therefore, the philosopher-legislator who watches over mankind by inculcating prudence about how to moderate a given political order and make it more humane (preface; 1.1; 24.10; 29.19). Indeed, while moderation required delay in enunciating a single principle until he had investigated the world’s complexity (including two books on religion), *Spirit* inculcates moderation from its opening. The preface warns that only those with the “genius” to exhaustively understand a regime can reasonably propose reforms, since some changes might make matters worse—remarks offered four decades before the French Revolution and its ultimately radical stances toward religion and reason (preface [230–31/xlv]).

When discussing the spirit of religion in American politics and constitutionalism it is important to note that the philosophically moderate Montesquieu and his disciple William Blackstone—not the social-contractarian, analytic philosopher Locke nor any such radical or rationalist minds—were the foremost philosophical influences upon the framers of the Declaration, the 1787 Constitution, and the Bill of Rights as a whole. The obviously Lockean dimensions to American constitutionalism and the thinking of leading founders, most evident in the Declaration, should not eclipse the larger complexity of principles that characterizes America’s founding. The American blend simultaneously draws upon tenets of not only liberalism and modern republicanism but also classical philosophy, Christianity, and classic common law.¹⁵ Such moderation or balancing of diverse principles pervades American constitutionalism and extends beyond institutions to shape the complexity of American life and thought, evident in our perpetual blending of pluralism and principle, individual rights and public purposes. *The Spirit of Laws* informs this American complexity more than any other book save the Bible; its other rival for this distinction, Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, in fact draws heavily upon Montesquieu.¹⁶

Given this background, it makes sense that Montesquieu’s analysis of religion and politics endorses the element of political moderation in Lockean

toleration; yet it also endorses spiritual moderation rather than zeal either for or against religion. It is more reasonable to hold a moderate view of the capacity claimed by reason and modern science to guide thought and politics in complete separation from an inclination toward faith and transcendent meaning. While Montesquieu is indebted to modern and liberal philosophy, his main works—a novel (*Persian Letters*), a history (*Considerations on the Romans*), and a one-of-a-kind treatise (*Spirit of Laws*)—comprise a single project to temper rationalism, the distortion of reality caused by unwarranted belief in clarity or demonstrability. His novel blending of the spirits of Michel de Montaigne and Isaac Newton informs his kinder, gentler view that human nature and natural right seek equilibrium and tranquility through a moderation at once individual and communal, practical and theoretical. While he is most famous for his constitutionalism, which utilizes a model of liberty in the English constitution, it is rarely noted that in closing his portrait of England Montesquieu warns against “extreme” liberty and extremes “even of reason” that accompany modern political thinking (*Spirit* 11.4 [395/155]; 11.6 [407/166]). His predominantly negative idea of liberty, as tranquility or freedom from fear (11.6), does echo Hobbes in defining human nature in somewhat rationalist and materialist terms—that is, more by aversion to insecurity than orientation to a higher end. This might provide the rationale for Montesquieu to develop an esoteric doctrine of Lockean skepticism about religion and the need to privatize it. A more complete picture, however, suggests that he repudiates Hobbes by insisting that liberty requires political moderation and the further development of our natural sociability, as well as that our nature is open to higher aims of magnanimity and greatness, even to the divine (1.1–2; 4.2; 5.12; 24.1).¹⁷

We should privilege the views on religion in Montesquieu’s masterwork—which, he notes in the preface to *The Spirit of Laws*, is the product of twenty years of philosophical labor—over the quite skeptical *Persian Letters* and the skeptical but more moderate *Considerations*.¹⁸ The analysis of religion in *The Spirit of Laws* is more comprehensive, and the only one arising under a stated principle of moderation. Perhaps his long experience of England (living there 1729–31) also persuaded him of the drawbacks of a rationalist culture of individual liberty that privatized and controlled religion in accord with Lockean theory; this is evident in critical remarks on a culture of rationalism and individualism that close his second portrait of England (*Spirit* 19.27 [end]).

The analysis of religion begins right away with his conception of human nature and its inherent laws in book 1, arguing that “the law that impresses on us the idea of a creator and thereby leads us toward him is the first of the natural laws in importance, though not first in the order of these laws.” This accepts the modern focus on man’s material condition and how to improve it but also revives an ancient and medieval spirit by recognizing higher ends (*Spirit* 1.2 [235/6]). He also transcends the more rationalist conceptions of liberalism, whether of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, or John Rawls, by arguing that among the “relations of equity” or natural right that preexist human laws is the principle that “if one intelligent being had created another intelligent being, the created one ought to remain in its original dependency” (1.1 [233/4]). It is true that *The Spirit of Laws* pervasively criticizes despotism, since Montesquieu will not have man suffer physical, political, or moral oppression as a patient citizen of the city of God. He also criticizes oppressive or despotic practices of religion or of religious influences on politics, including severe criticisms of Christian leaders or doctrine. Still, while he condemns the brutality of ambitious princes or factious republics, he also repudiates the mere security or rationalist tranquility imposed by any new kind of Leviathan. His criticisms of philosophers and extremes of reason suggest that he sees no panacea in the reign of secularized reason, science, technology, or commerce. He would reform the city of man by emphasizing the natural desire for a tranquil, hospitable abode, but he also leaves room for, and marks his respect for, higher aspirations.

NATURAL THEOLOGY AND JURISPRUDENCE IN *THE SPIRIT OF LAWS*

The larger philosophical aims evident throughout *The Spirit of Laws* must govern, then, any interpretation of its complex analysis of religion and politics. To interpret Montesquieu as a deft irreligionist akin to Niccolò Machiavelli, Baruch Spinoza, Pierre Bayle, or John Locke places him at an extreme of rationalism and secularism that defies the mature spirit of his work. Several such analyses discern an “audacious” attack on biblical religion, natural law, and providence that would “rid us of the concern with the next world for the sake of peace and security in this one”; according to these analyses, Montesquieu definitely views “Christianity as a danger to a sound politics” and adopts “heretical” views that “convict [him] of irreligion,” and his philosophical project is “antitheological” for arguing that “political life

is to cease to take its bearings by any of the previously dominant claims for the supremacy of revealed, supernatural, and suprarational or contrarational divine authority and law.”¹⁹ This school interprets Montesquieu’s every utterance or silence on religion in the vein of irreligion, although the only principle justifying this is confidence that he is an esoteric radical philosopher. There is no mention of his stated aim to moderate the zeal of modern philosophy. Moderation instead is seen merely as a rhetorical or prudential device, not a principle of his philosophy (further implying that prudence also is a device, not a substantive political and ethical principle for him). Or, if we should note moderation, it is best understood as an “intransigent moderation” that equates to the radical secularizing of a Machiavelli, Locke, or Bayle. Even his statement on moderation is read as a disguised admission of the “absurd inadequacy” of his modern philosophy compared to the great classical and medieval philosophers, since he felt “impelled to obfuscate” the true greatness of prior philosophy given its illiberal, intolerant tendencies.²⁰

In these analyses of Montesquieu’s most philosophical discussions of religion, human nature, and politics in *The Spirit of Laws*—books 1, 24, and 25—each scholar assumes that true Christian faith entails severe opposition between reason and revelation, philosophy and theology. This yields the dilemma that a philosopher must either signal subordination to the church and thus imperil philosophical integrity, or declare philosophical independence and signal irreligion. A related assumption is that a philosopher is hostile to Christianity, and biblical religion generally, unless he accepts a degree of theocracy or union of religious and political authority—a corollary being that a philosopher is skeptical or hostile to Christianity unless adopting a radical separation of nature and divine grace, thus accepting illimitable divine will. The pattern of these assumed premises is irremediable conflict between reason and revelation, philosophy and theology, religious authority and liberty; there can be no middle ground. This leads to much emphasis on the contemporary Jansenist critique of *The Spirit of Laws* by the Abbé de la Roche, as the gravest evidence that Montesquieu very likely was a Spinozist who rejected a supernatural creator, miracles, and biblical religion. Earlier scholarship was more sober about the precarious status of Jansenist theology in the Catholic tradition, given its severely Augustinian views of the depravity of nature and the illimitable power of divine will; those scholars also noted Montesquieu’s many defenders among clergy, even bishops, who repudiated the Jansenist attack. A more balanced view

notes, for example, that the “Jansenist abbé’s conception of natural law was very narrow, and the same applies to his conception of Christianity.”²¹

The entire “Spinozism” reading of Montesquieu is more complicated, and doubtful, if one employs other theological and philosophical benchmarks for compatibility with Christian orthodoxy, beyond strongly Augustinian or Jansenist ones. No scholarship in this Spinozist school notes, for example, any consensus between Montesquieu and that venerable source of orthodoxy Thomas Aquinas. Some find antitheism implicit in Montesquieu’s distinction between Christian “precepts” and “counsels” of perfection (*Spirit* 24.6), since this permits a dilution of precepts or commands into recommendations. This in turn points to the privatizing, or political irrelevance, of religious belief. However, Aquinas deemed this an orthodox distinction rooted in the New Testament, fitting for a revelation that neither condemns the happiness of this world nor demands that all Christians be saints to gain heaven.²² The Spinozist view also finds irreligion in Montesquieu’s arguments for curtailing penal enforcement of Christian morality in politics, as part of his covert depiction of Christianity in toto as despotism (see 12.4–6; 25.9–15; 26.2, 7–13). If this is valid, then Aquinas holds the same antitheological stance. He states that legal regulation of morals should address only basic requirements of order and security, not enforce Christian perfectionism.²³ According to the hyper-Augustinian standards for Christian or biblical orthodoxy assumed by the Spinozist view of Montesquieu, Montesquieu and Aquinas are equally antireligious.

There was a time when Aquinas’s arguments for compatibility between reason and revelation, politics and salvation, provoked controversy, including condemnations by the bishops of Oxford and Paris. It is safer to note that Aquinas’s theologically moderate views about the relationship of nature and grace have a greater claim to Christian orthodoxy than do the extreme standards convicting Montesquieu here. Tertullian’s stance that the church must reject any accommodation between Athens and Jerusalem was declared heretical by the church fathers, while Aquinas was canonized not long after condemnation by some. Montesquieu is no Thomist; the point, rather, is that he might reasonably be interpreted as criticizing the antireligious stance he found in his modern predecessors, most particularly Machiavelli and Bayle, while staking out his own moderate position between rationalist atheism and Christian perfectionism or theocracy. Nor does this reading deny that, in comparison to Tocqueville’s philosophy, his stance is more utilitarian, with

some degree of deism and skepticism about metaphysics. Examination of a few suggestive passages from *Spirit of Laws* will have to suffice to discern his moderation—mostly from books 1, 24, and 25, in which Montesquieu declares his thematic attention to natural theology and religion.

Book 1 does open with brief and seemingly rationalist generalities about the metaphysics of law in the created universe. Much scholarly debate considers whether Baruch Spinoza, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, or other modern philosophers are the greater influence here. Characteristically balancing the mind of the jurist and that of the philosopher, Montesquieu's topic in book 1 is not law but laws. In a discussion of "laws in general" he opens with a few paragraphs on metaphysics and natural theology, "laws in their relation with the various beings," and barely returns to these topics in the remaining seven hundred pages (in recent English translation). Laws in their "most extended meaning" are the "necessary relations deriving from the nature of things" (*Spirit* 1.1 [232/3]). All of the five levels of "beings" have laws, and in this "extended" sense "the divinity has its laws." He immediately rejects, however, either cosmological fatalism or determinism, because the free and metaphysical dimension of "intelligent beings" could not be the product of "blind fate." By the third brief paragraph he moves back toward medieval views, to define laws by reason: the divinity is a "primitive reason"—a primary or basic reason of all beings—and laws are the relations between the prime reason and the various beings but also the relations among the latter. In the fourth paragraph he further defines the divinity as "creator and preserver" of "the universe," and it is by laws made through "his wisdom and his power" that he creates and preserves. The next three paragraphs adopt a Newtonian tone, emphasizing that the "invariable laws" from the prime reason organize nonintelligent matter in motion; that "the creator" governs and preserves the world through these rules; and that, paradoxically, all the motion and complexity of the world presupposes such laws: "Every diversity is *uniformity*, every change is *constancy*" (1.1 [232–33/3–4]; emphasis original). Scholars of philosophy and natural theology find these analyses cryptic, or inadequate, or perhaps deliberately misleading; as noted, both theists and nontheists detect Spinoza or other radical rationalist philosophies here, including an implicit denial of miracles.²⁴ In one of his public responses to theological criticism—the *Defense of the Spirit of Laws* (1750)—Montesquieu persistently declares himself a lawyer or jurist as well as a philosopher, and he argues that requiring a work of philosophy,

politics, and law to profess theological orthodoxy is an error.²⁵ This presumes a philosophical and jurisprudential autonomy from clerical authority less evident in France than in English common law, such as in works by John Fortescue or Edward Coke that open with brief statements about divine law, natural law, and common law, but it is not evidence of irreligion. Montesquieu offers a weak teleology about the divine, human nature, law, and the aims of politics; such rational analysis does not challenge or offend biblical conceptions of the creator but only barely supports them. On the other hand, few scholars note the fundamental point that in sharp contrast to Hobbes or Locke he finds it necessary to define human law in relation to natural theology and metaphysics at all.²⁶

This complex analysis in book 1 launches a redefinition of natural right in the work, in non-Hobbesian terms of basic individual and social feelings such as sentiments toward family and friends. The first four “natural laws” of prepolitical man are to seek peace, nourishment, sociability, and sexual union with other humans, and both knowledge and society (*Spirit* 1.2).²⁷ The first (or fifth) natural law, to seek knowledge of God, has an ambiguous status: it is first “in importance,” since nature “impresses on us the idea of a creator and thereby leads us toward him,” but we develop this inclination only after experiencing the first four laws (1.2 [235–36/6]). For Montesquieu human nature and natural law ascend higher than earlier moderns had thought, but they stop short of the teleological heights of some ancients and medievals.²⁸ He confirms this modern, if humane and elevated, anthropology in the next discussion of natural law or natural right (*droit naturel*) in the work (3.10).²⁹ Natural right primarily involves neither self-preservation nor self-defense, nor even egoistic liberty, each of which reductively privileges isolated Hobbesian or Cartesian individuals. Rather, it concerns “natural feelings,” such as “respect for a father, tenderness for one’s children and women, laws of honor, or the state of one’s health”—all of which are complementary with religion (3.10 [260/29–30]). Of course, near this same passage he equates monarchical honor with self-interest, hardly marking himself as a virtue theorist (3.7). Nevertheless, these humane dimensions to his anthropology and natural right upset reductionist readings. His political science steers a middle course between the substantive natural right of Aristotle or natural law of Aquinas, and the materialism of Machiavelli or Hobbes.³⁰ A human nature oriented to not only security but also sociability and freedom, including the freedom to pursue higher aims, holds a middle

ground because we are neither as beleaguered in a hostile cosmos nor as blessed with intimate affinity for the high as some have thought. The genius of politics—the proper spirit of laws—is to best preserve our nature in all its complexity and moderation.

FREEDOM FOR AND FREEDOM FROM RELIGION IN MONTESQUIEU'S MODERATION

This fundamental understanding of *The Spirit of Laws*, and of the views of law, natural theology, and human nature in its early books, permits a briefer analysis of the subsequent remarks on religion. Viewed from this ground, it is harder to interpret Montesquieu's particular remarks as hostile to religion or Christianity in particular. Their more natural meaning is more probably his intended one: a friendlier stance on religion than held by the radical Enlightenment, if largely for utilitarian service to liberal moderation. The negative theme of tolerance persists, to temper the role of religion in public life and possible threats to tranquility. Still, if this is utilitarian and tends to lower the aims of politics, Montesquieu is novel among such moderns for regularly praising revealed religion and faith as not only useful but instructive for philosophy and politics.

One such moment is his praise for William Penn, and for the Jesuit missionaries in Paraguay, when discussing ancient Greek ideas of republics, their virtues, and the distinct education needed for demanding ideals (*Spirit* 4.6). This notable chapter contrasts “extraordinary” republican institutions—mostly ancient—and “the dregs and corruption of our modern times.” Montesquieu blends criticism and praise for legislators from Lycurgus and Plato to the Jesuits, and his brief treatment hardly presents these philosophers and founders on their own terms. The project of seeking republican virtue, especially the Greek model, is singular, extraordinary, severe, and domineering, although the Jesuits have made the native people “happier” through their efforts. Still, amid much complex analysis, there is unqualified praise for “Mr. Penn,” “a true Lycurgus” and “honorable gentleman” (*honnête homme*) as a founder. He has “formed a people” according to “integrity” or probity. In contrast to Lycurgus, he has persuaded “a free people” to adopt “peace” rather than war as the polity's object (4.6 [268/37]). There is no mention that Penn is (famously) a Quaker, nor of the religious toleration decreed in his 1682 *Pennsylvania Frame of Government*—although

Montesquieu emphasizes that very principle later in the work. He praises the Jesuits (and seemingly Penn, since he links the two modern republics) for demonstrating “the idea of religion joined to that of humanity”—the virtue of gentleness and respect for human dignity that is central to his own moderate philosophy and political science (4.6 [268–69/37]).³¹

A tour of some highlights from Montesquieu’s treatment of religion prior to the two books dedicated to it (books 24 and 25) also reveals a blend of praise and criticism. He offers striking praise of “the religion of the present day” for the mildness it brings to the modern “right of nations” governing war, displacing Roman ferocity (*Spirit* 10.3 [378–79/139]).³² He also credits “our modern times,” “contemporary reasoning,” and modern philosophy and mores. Moreover, one of the four “sorts of laws” that define the right of nations is “the law of natural enlightenment, which wants us to do to others what we would want to have done to us” (378/139). This duty to treat others as we would wish for ourselves, in international relations and war, is a striking echo of Christianity’s Golden Rule. To be sure, it is one that Christian statesmen or peoples fail to meet, as the sequel declares when castigating the Spaniards in their conquest of Mexico for discarding their “gentle religion” and instead committing “evils,” exterminating the conquered, and spreading “a raging superstition” (10.4 [381/142]). This is not the only castigation of Christian clerics and princes for hypocrisy and crimes. Then again, Montesquieu’s book on slavery in relation to climate credits Christianity for beginning to abolish and curtail slavery, as no other religion or philosophy has done (15.7).

As the analysis begins to transcend the dominance first of classical and medieval political science (part 1, books 1–8), then of climate and culture (part 3, books 14–18), Montesquieu explores how enlightened laws can moderate the effects of climate and culture especially. Religion is among the seven elements comprising the “general spirit” that governs any people (19.4). His discussion of English mores produced by their constitution of liberty (19.27) thus includes brief remarks on religion. A spirit of free thinking and atheism arises, but such liberty also yields “evil” and “repressive” laws against the former established religion. This comment on Protestant persecution of Catholics implicitly criticizes Locke’s apology for this principle in his *Letter on Toleration* (19.27 [580/330]). Further, king and Parliament do not trust the permitted clergy to be self-governing—given a fear of backsliding toward Catholicism; given this mistrust, and the pervasive culture of liberty, the

clergy must earn any respect and congregants they have. They “would seek to persuade,” and “very fine works would come from their pens, to prove the revelation and the providence of the great Being” (19.27 [581–83/331–33]). As noted, he warns of atomism or individualism in English culture, and extreme individual and political liberty (19.27 [582/332]). Nonetheless, as he turns to a new book on commerce, he notes that the nominally Protestant English have so moderated Christianity and its role in politics as to be “the people in the world who have best known how to take advantage of each of these three great things at the same time: religion, commerce, and liberty” (20.7 [590/343]). His largely utilitarian approach continues when criticizing the Scholastics, “infatuated” with Aristotle’s criticisms of usury, for banning any lending at interest. This brings economic “misfortunes” and also a new form of anti-Semitism, since Jews could lend for profit when Christians could not (21.20 [639–41/387–89]). Eventually, as the title to this chapter notes, commerce “made its way through” this “barbarism” of Scholasticism, bigotry, and the rapacity of princes and their occasional persecution of Jews. Once the Jews invented bills of exchange and international credit both the theologians and the princes learned to “more wisely” regularize this new path to “prosperity.” Theology lagged behind the virtue of humanity but was taught a lesson by an exploiting self-interest. The princes especially have “begun to be cured of Machiavellism,” learning that there “must be more moderation in councils” (21.20 [641/389]).

These occasional remarks in parts 1–4 of the work affirm that religion is one of the elements that comprises “the spirit of laws” itself and deserves discrete examination (*Spirit* 1.3; see also 19.4). Part 5 of the six parts does so—exclusively in books 24 and 25; then book 26, on the relation of various kinds of laws, features analysis of how “divine right” and “ecclesiastical right” relate to natural right and political right, with a tendency for circumscribing the direct political role of religion (26.1 [750–51/494]). The opening theme of book 24 frames the problem: the predominant, rival tendencies to evangelize either “the next life” or “this one,” to elevate either “heaven” or “earth” over the other. Montesquieu’s moderate alternative is to “unite them both.” He first stipulates the distinct perspective of the political philosopher, as “one who writes on politics” and is “not a theologian” (a stance Tocqueville clearly echoes). He seeks not the best path to “the more sublime truths” of eternal salvation but to balance the goal of heaven and the necessities of earthly politics while damaging neither (24.1 [714/459]). “The Christian

religion, which orders men to love one another, no doubt wants the best political laws and the best civil laws for each people, because those laws are, after it, the greatest good men can give and receive" (24.1 [715/459]). This harmonizing of the city of man and the city of God, as directed by a new political science of the general spirit that respects "the one [religion] whose roots are in heaven" while negotiating the many "false religions," has been immensely influential in subsequent centuries—perhaps most especially in the founding of America's constitutional order. That said, it earned only tepid public support from clergy in France at the time and vociferous criticism from more Augustinian, narrowly orthodox voices.

The reading that every concern for politics in books 24 and 25 is covertly irreligious, rather than seeking a middle ground between atheism and fanatical religiosity, also fits poorly with the opening themes of book 25. Montesquieu again contrasts rival extremes to be avoided—here as "the pious man" who "always speaks of religion" in terms of "what he loves" versus "the atheist" obsessed with religion in terms of "what he fears." The sequel notes that humans are "exceedingly drawn" to idolatry (object worship) and, at the other extreme, to worship of a purely spiritual divinity; we also are "exceedingly drawn to hope and to fear" (*Spirit* 25.1 [735/439]; 25.2 [735/439, 737/480]). His concern with moderation indicates, therefore, that his criticisms of Bayle—for categorically separating church and state and for seeing only Christianity's bad effects on politics—are genuine (24.2, 6). Just as Montesquieu criticized the antipolitical aspects of both Epicureanism and ascetic Christianity as extreme for human nature (23.21), he criticizes both a hyper-Augustinian fusing of religion and politics that subsumes politics and the antitheism of Epicurean and radical Enlightenment thought. Any philosophy that finds no transcendent inclinations in human nature or no room for them in politics is extreme; it misses a crucial element of humanity. He simultaneously seeks to temper Christian perfectionism as embodied in monks, Inquisitors, and advocates of an "overly contemplative life," given his aims of tranquility, toleration, and moderation (24.11 [722/466]; see also 5.2 and 25.11).

The Spinozist portrait of Montesquieu as adopting Machiavellian secular ambition and rationalism, via esoteric writing, also fits ill with other analyses in *The Spirit of Laws*. His respect for Christianity does emphasize its utility in tempering Machiavellian brutality, citing its impetus toward a more humane, moderate domestic politics and international right (*Spirit* 10.3;

24.2–3).³³ Christianity in particular—in explicit contrast to Islam—inclines politics toward moderate rather than despotic government, and moderation in government is a central concern of Montesquieu’s philosophy.³⁴ Thus we moderns “owe to Christianity both a certain political right in government and a certain right of nations in war, for which human nature can never be sufficiently grateful” (24.3 [717/461–62]). A concern to moderate fanatical Christian faith or any religious zealotry is equally vital. Humane utility is more important than truth abstractly understood when a political philosopher evaluates religion. He thus advises on how to “attack” or weaken the attachment to a religion—we might infer, immoderate and illiberal religions most especially (24.1, 19; 25.12; see also 26.7–12).³⁵ As a modern and liberal, he balances respect for the natural inclination to seek transcendent truth (1.2; 24.1) with concern that religion should not mandate perfection, or place too much emphasis on a contemplative life (24.7, 11), or threaten individual or political tranquility. It is not the theological truth or falsity of any dogma that makes it useful or pernicious in politics, but the use or abuse made of it (24.19).

These Enlightenment emphases, however, don’t belittle Christianity or man’s natural inclination toward transcendent meaning—as do Lucretius, Machiavelli, and Rousseau, or as Bayle’s radical separationism tends to do. Montesquieu’s moderating of programmatic atheism also informs his recognition that religious faith is “the greatest spring (*ressort*) among men” (*Spirit* 24.14 [725/469]; see also 20.7). Indeed, two final passages encapsulate his insistence upon the mutual utility of religion and politics properly understood, and the moderation he seeks between them. Since “both religion and the civil laws should aim principally to make good citizens of men,” if one of these strays from this aim toward a dangerous extreme, then “the other should aim more toward it.” The danger is not religion per se but a cycle of extremes that overwhelms a political culture because of a failure in “the harmony and precision of ideas” in either religion or civil law, which then “spreads” from one to the other. Then “religion condemns things that civil law should permit,” while the “civil laws permit on their side what religion should condemn” (24.14 [724/468]). Still, his moderation is not simply utilitarian, given his serious and sympathetic discussions of religious belief. Thus while satirizing the bloodthirsty fanaticism of Inquisitors toward Jews, in the guise of reporting a “humble remonstrance” from a Jew, Montesquieu includes the Jewish view that Christians should not

punish “the quite pardonable error of believing that God still loves that which he loved.” He follows that eloquent argument for toleration with a note offering an interesting rebuttal to Jewish theological views, in which he distinguishes toleration from religious relativism: “This is the source for the Jews’ blindness, of their failure to sense that the economy of the Gospel is within the order of God’s designs and that thus it is a continuation of his immutability itself” (25.13 [746–47/490]). For a political thinker who is not a theologian, this discourse on tolerance reveals sympathetic knowledge of Christian theology.

“THAT THIS NATION, UNDER GOD, SHALL HAVE A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM”

Much evidence in the modern liberal democracies confirms Rousseau’s warnings about the spiritual hunger unsatisfied by bourgeois life and the inadequacy of the Enlightenment secularism that promoted such materialism.³⁶ When Rousseau chastises modern reason for disregarding the “great” and powerful “spring” of religious longing he merely echoes Montesquieu. Moreover, none of the Spinozist readings of Montesquieu account for the judgment by the prominent Dominican priest and Catholic apologist Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, who in 1861 deemed book 24 of *The Spirit of Laws* “the most beautiful defense of Christianity in the eighteenth century” and the work of “a great soul.”³⁷

Montesquieu’s philosophical and political moderation provides a crucial foundation for an American constitutionalism marked by institutional, legal, and philosophical balance—a moderation evident both in the Constitution and in the Declaration of Independence, if the latter is read, in its entirety, as balancing Enlightenment abstractions with appeals to an active providence, common law legal tradition, and republican concepts of duty and honor. America enacts a Montesquieuan moderation that assimilates moderns and ancients, liberalism and republicanism, Christianity and the classic common law. The substitution of “the pursuit of happiness” for Lockean property as a primary natural right also echoes Montesquieu’s commonsense philosophy, neither strongly teleological nor starkly reductive about the ends of man and purposes of government. Accompanying the Declaration, Constitution, and Bill of Rights as embodiments of American moderation is the Founding Father George Washington. Even a brief survey of his views

on religion reveals the political and philosophical balance he pursued as leading statesman.³⁸ His central, unifying presence from the 1770s through the 1790s suggests the value of studying his thought as epitomizing the high middle ground, and core meaning, of America's founding principles. Lincoln astutely rests his arguments in 1838 about perpetuation of the American order primarily on a "political religion" of rational education but also, in the end, on his invocation of both Washington and Christian belief.

Lincoln's American statesmanship thus echoes Washington's Farewell Address, the last of many such echoes in Washington's career of Montesquieu's argument that free government must shape the morals or manners of its citizenry, especially by harmonizing Christianity and good citizenship (*Spirit*, book 24). Not all of those echoes were drafted by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, nor is there evidence that either Washington or Lincoln read Montesquieu. The point is that the spirit of moderation permeated American thought even if the source was not invoked. Among the most famous lines of Washington's Farewell are declarations that "of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports," that "a volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity," and that just policies are "recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human Nature." Nor can we suppose that "morality can be maintained without religion," for while "a refined education" might serve for exceptional minds, "reason and experience forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." A Montesquieuan spirit informs the sequel more obviously, that "virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government." It is a small step to Lincoln's statement that only under God could America have a new birth of freedom from the horror of near self-destruction, then to his invocation of humility and charity in the second inaugural address as a further call to rebirth. To the extent that such characteristically American harmonizing of the spirit of liberty and spirit of religion draws upon modern philosophy, Montesquieu is the indispensable if often unacknowledged influence.

NOTES

1. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 1, part 1, chapter 2,

"On the Point of Departure," 43; this chapter adapts and revises my "Religion and Liberty in America: The Moderate Spirit of Montesquieu and Tocqueville," chapter 4 of *Democracy in*

Moderation: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Sustainable Liberalism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016) but largely excludes sections on the American founding and Tocqueville per se and excludes many source citations throughout.

2. Harvey Mansfield concludes (in Tocquevillean spirit) that the views of religion and politics in Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke ultimately “endanger freedom”; Harvey Mansfield, “The Religious Issue and the Origin of Modern Constitutionalism,” *America’s Constitutional Soul* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 101–14.

3. See Françoise Mélonio, *Tocqueville and the French*, trans. Beth Raps (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 112–18; and Rebecca Kingston, “Montesquieu on Religion and the Question of Toleration,” in *Montesquieu’s Science of Politics: Essays on “The Spirit of Laws,”* ed. David W. Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 375–408.

4. See, e.g., Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010) and Kenneth D. Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

5. The first two points are argued in the prologue and part 1 of Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*: see the sources cited therein, as well as my “Montesquieu” entry in *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, ed. Michael Gibbons (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118474396.wbpt0685>.

6. A statement of this view, emphasizing Washington’s middle ground, is Vincent Phillip Muñoz, *God and the Founders: Madison, Washington, and Jefferson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

7. See James Stoner, “Religious Liberty and Common Law: Free Exercise Exemptions and American Courts,” *Polity* 26 (1993), 1–24; and, more generally, Stoner, *Common-Law Liberty: Rethinking American Constitutionalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

8. See, e.g., Donald Lutz, “The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought,”

American Political Science Review 78 (1984): 189–97.

9. Diana Schaub, “Of Believers and Barbarians: Montesquieu’s Enlightened Toleration,” in *Early Modern Skepticism and the Origins of Toleration*, ed. Alan Levine (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 1999), 225–47; Robert Bartlett, “On the Politics of Faith and Reason: The Project of Enlightenment in Pierre Bayle and Montesquieu,” *Journal of Politics* 63 (2001): 1–28: each draws upon David Lowenthal, “Book I of Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws*,” *American Political Science Review* 53 (1959): 485–98; and Thomas L. Pangle, *Montesquieu’s Philosophy of Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). Schaub’s more recent work in this vein includes “The Regime and Montesquieu’s Principles of Education,” in *Montesquieu and the Spirit of Modernity*, ed. David Carrithers and Patrick Coleman (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation at the University of Oxford, 2002), 77–100; and “Women, Christianity, and the Modern in Montesquieu’s *Considerations on the Romans*,” in *The Pious Sex: Essays on Women and Religion in the History of Political Thought*, ed. Andrea Radasanu (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010), 149–67. See also Judith Shklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Clifford Orwin’s more subtle argument on Montesquieu’s irreligion in “‘For Which Human Nature Can Never Be Too Grateful’: Montesquieu as the Heir of Christianity,” in *Recovering Reason: Essays in Honor of Thomas L. Pangle*, ed. Timothy Burns (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010).

10. Thomas L. Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu’s “Spirit of the Laws”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

11. Kingston, “Montesquieu on Religion and the Question of Toleration,” 399–400, which cites arguments by the Dominican theologian Lacordaire (discussed below), and by scholars Robert Shackleton and F. T. H. Fletcher, that Montesquieu was sympathetic toward Christianity. Roger Oake disputes that Montesquieu was irreligious but finds him more Stoic than Christian in praising religion’s utility, in “Montesquieu’s Religious Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14 (1953): 548–60.

Dennis Rasmussen argues that Montesquieu moderates both religion and rationalism, in *The Pragmatic Enlightenment: Recovering the Liberalism of Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 173–78, but still emphasizes skepticism and utility. A complex version of this utilitarian approach is Joshua Bandoch's, "Montesquieu's Selective Religious Intolerance in *Of the Spirit of the Laws*," *Political Studies* 64, no. 2 (2016): 351–67.

12. Charles de Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, book 29, chapter 1, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Caillois (Paris: Gallimard, 1949–51), 2:865. Subsequent citations of *Spirit* indicate book and chapter and, in brackets, two sets of page numbers—the page in volume 2 of the Caillois edition and the page in Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) (thus here [865/602]). I occasionally revise the Cohler translation and the Thomas Nugent translation (New York: Hafner, 1949).

13. Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), esp. 189–204; Nathaniel Gilmore and Vickie B. Sullivan, "Montesquieu's Teaching on the Dangers of Extreme Corrections: Japan, the Catholic Inquisition, and Moderation in *The Spirit of the Laws*," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017): 460–70; and Vickie B. Sullivan, "Part II: Christian Ideas," in *Montesquieu and the Despotism of Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 77–134.

14. Rebecca Kingston shifts toward this affirmative view in the entry "Religion," in *A Montesquieu Dictionary*, ed. Catherine Volpilhac-Augier, ENS Lyon, September 2013, <http://dictionnairemontesquieu.enslyon.fr/en/article/1377637039/en>; Keegan Callanan deploys a similar spirit in "Une infinité de biens": Montesquieu on Religion and Free Government," *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 4 (2014): 739–67, while persistently refuting the Spinozistic reading by the scholars noted above; he analyzes many points independently discerned in *Democracy in Moderation* and in this chapter.

15. Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 118n20 cites a range of scholarly sources on these points.

16. I argue this in *The Cloaking of Power: Montesquieu, Blackstone, and the Rise of Judicial Activism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

17. In addition to my writings cited above, see Mark H. Waddicor, *Montesquieu and the Philosophy of Natural Law* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), esp. 16–21, 36–45, 64, 76–81, 85–86, 132–33, and 177–92. See also Paul Anthony Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty: War, Religion, Commerce, Climate, Terrain, Technology, Uneasiness of Mind, the Spirit of Political Vigilance, and the Foundations of the Modern Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

18. See Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 119nn23–24, on religion in these two earlier works.

19. Bartlett, "Politics of Faith and Reason," 18, 27 (see 16–27 generally); Schaub, "Believers and Barbarians," 233, 235, 238; Pangle, *Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity*, 1. Orwin's "Montesquieu as the Heir of Christianity" diverges somewhat by noting praise for Christianity and discerning a gentler secularist teaching (278, 280).

20. Bartlett, "Politics of Faith and Reason," 24; Schaub, "Believers and Barbarians," 243; Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 145–46.

21. The particular contrast here is Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 15–19, with the measured view in Waddicor, *Montesquieu and Natural Law*, x, 85. An alternate view, noting support from Archbishop de Beaumont but also Montesquieu's "relativism" and utilitarianism, is Andrew Lynch, "Montesquieu and the Ecclesiastical Critics of *l'Esprit des Lois*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38 (1977): 487–500.

22. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1–2. Q108.A4, "Whether certain definite counsels are fittingly proposed in the New Law?" (Dominican Fathers translation); see in the New Testament, e.g., Matthew 19:21 and 19:12; 1 Corinthians 7:35.

23. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1–2. Q96.A2, "Does It Belong to Human Law to Repress All Vices?"

24. Skeptical readings of book 1, developing Lowenthal, "Book I of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*," and Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, include Pangle, *Theological Basis*; Michael Zuckert, "Natural Law, Natural Rights, and Classical Liberalism: On Montesquieu's Critique of Hobbes," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18 (2001): 227–51; Stuart D. Warner, "Montesquieu's Prelude: An Interpretation of Book I of *The Spirit of the Laws*," in *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Svetozar Minkov (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006), 161–204.

25. Charles de Montesquieu, *Défense de l'Esprit des lois*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 2:1121–66; see Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 124n31 for extended analysis on this point.

26. See part 1 of *Défense*, section 1, answer to objection 3; also Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 124n32 and the discussion at 124–25 of Montesquieu's citation in 1.1 of Plutarch's *Moralia*.

27. See Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 125n35 for further arguments against the Spinozistic reading.

28. That said, Aquinas accepts a similar distinction about human capacities and the sequence of our reasoning; *Summa Theologiae* 1.Q88.A3.

29. Pangle overlooks this in *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, 309–10, and in "The Philosophic Understandings of Human Nature Informing the Constitution," in *Confronting the Constitution*, ed. Allan Bloom (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1990), 15–18, 24–37; he notes it in *Theological Basis*, 34–35, but through his Spinozistic reading; Zuckert also omits it in "Natural Law, Natural Rights." Schaub notes *Spirit* 3.10 in "Regime and Education," 86–87, but overlooks the simultaneous classification of "natural sentiments" of humane regard for fellows as natural right.

30. Lowenthal suggests this momentarily in "Book I," 495; see also more moderate moments in Pangle's earlier work, *Philosophy*, 20–47.

31. Schaub, "Regime and Education," 92, 99, notes the reference to Penn but only as a commentary on a theocracy; this omits the positive dimension of Penn's reputation for forming a polity premised on religious toleration, and also his harmonizing of commerce, liberty,

and Christian education—both of which, presumably, were bases for Montesquieu's singular praise.

32. Rahe notes this in *Logic of Liberty*, 93, and also in "Was Montesquieu a Philosopher of History?," in *Cahiers Montesquieu* 10 (2013): 71–86; this point as well as most of the subsequent points also are noted in Callanan, "Une infinité de biens" and in Sullivan, *Montesquieu and Despotism Ideas of Europe*.

33. See *Spirit* 6.13, 12.29, and 19.18 on political moderation that religion, even Islam, provides.

34. Montesquieu entitles *Spirit* 2.4.3 "That Moderate Government is Better Suited to the Christian Religion, and Despotism Government to Mohammedanism."

35. Most scholars read *Spirit* 25.12 as advocating weakened attachment to religion per se via enticements (commerce, prosperity), but amid the general misreading of Spinozism they mistranslate a crucial phrase and amplify its putative irreligious import; the Cohler translation also errs here. Montesquieu addresses both religion and the approach to "a religion"; "it is more certain to attack a religion"—not "religion" generically—"by favors, by the comforts of life," etc. (25.12 [746/489]; *il est plus sûr d'attaquer une religion par la faveur*). A narrower reading is warranted given earlier statements in books 2.4 and 2.5—on Christianity's special status, on the importance of avoiding extremes about religion, and on the dangers Islam poses to moderate politics. Bandoch implies this in "Montesquieu's Selective Intolerance"; Callanan's reading in "Une infinité de biens" is the most thorough.

36. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), book 4, page 312; cited in Bartlett, "Politics of Faith and Reason," 27.

37. Lacordaire, "Discours de réception à l'Académie Française," 1861, <http://www.academiefrancaise.fr/discoursdereceptionetreponsedefrancoisguizot1>, fourth paragraph; book 2.4 is further praised as "the highest testimony of what truth can do in a great soul who sincerely puts his thought in the service of men."

38. See "Washington's Harmony: The Balance of Traditions in the American Founding," in Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 50–77, and sources cited therein.

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CHAPTER 8

Hume on Church Establishments

History, Moderation, and Liberty

AARON SZYMKOWIAK

In a brief passage in part 12 of the posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume provides what was likely his final approach to the topic of the civil status of religion. Hume has Cleanthes arguing that all religion—even the “popular” variety—is salutary, requisite for good politics and character. “Religion however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all.”¹ Here is the modest, commonplace idea that belief in a future state is a necessary incentive to morals. Philo, usually understood to be voicing positions nearest Hume’s own, responds by considering the problem from the standpoint of a magistrate. How should he handle popular religion? “Every expedient which he tries for so humble a purpose is surrounded with inconveniencies. If he admits only one religion among his subjects, he must sacrifice, to an uncertain prospect of tranquility, every consideration of public liberty, science, reason, industry, and even his own independency. If he gives indulgence to several sects, which is the wiser maxim, he must preserve a very philosophical indifference to all of them, and carefully restrain the pretensions of the prevailing sect; otherwise he can expect nothing but endless disputes, quarrels, factions, persecutions, and civil commotions.”²

This marked ambivalence signals a general worry concerning the destructive political effects of religion. Curiously, it emerges amid a portion of

Hume's text that is often noted for its "reversal" of the skeptical tone on religious claims appearing beforehand.³ Is religion always publicly destructive? Or can we hope for its useful employment by way of politic direction? The answer to the latter question would seem to be no, expressed by way of an unhappy policy choice between establishment and open competition of sects.

The frame for this dilemma is to be found not in Hume's writings on religion but rather in two significant parts of his *History of England*. The first is an explicit treatment of the establishment issue in volume 3 of the *History*, where Hume seems most worried about fostering moderation and avoiding instability. The second is an account of seventeenth-century religious Independency in volume 5, where Hume prevaricates on establishment, concerning himself to a greater degree with the apparent connection between religion—at least of a certain sort—and liberty. Though Hume nowhere presses an active direction of religion for the sake of public virtue and in fact calls the very possibility into question, he is nonetheless forced to contend with practical alternatives; he sees religious passions as volatile, foolish, and antagonistic to public order, even if it turns out that their persistence is inevitable. Successful hedging of religious pretension turns, in Hume's philosophy, on correctly reading the connection of religious passion with political action. In the following pages, I will suggest that this matter admits of different types of historical interpretation. Hume's political imperatives on religion have as a common denominator the eschewing of any overarching material-social historicism, particularly of the sort one finds in Adam Smith's objections to the *History* 3 argument. Comparatively speaking, Hume's approach to religion in politics exhibits an admirable flexibility, albeit—as we shall see—one incapable of entering adequately into interpretation of religious doctrines and thus deficient in anticipating their public import.

HUME'S ESTABLISHMENT ARGUMENT IN *HISTORY* 3

Hume's most direct statement on church-state relations appears in quite succinct form at the beginning of *History* 3.29.⁴ In discussing the initial stages of the Protestant Reformation, Hume begins by saying he will address the relevant theological disputes, along with the particular "abuses" that generated a need for reform. Despite this promissory note of sorts, he takes initial leave of theology, arguing that we should consider the reasons "why

there must be an ecclesiastical order, and a public establishment of religion in every civilized community.”⁵ Summarized briefly, his argument is as follows. In every state, there are professions needing no help from a magistrate because they benefit their practitioners directly. Others need encouragement, since they aid the public but do not necessarily benefit those who would engage in them. The question requiring examination is whether the clergy can be described in this latter fashion and, by extension, whether religion itself needs encouragement as a public force. Hume’s suggestion is that any prudent leader will wish to discourage “interested diligence” in the clergy, because in all religion “except the true” such diligence is pernicious. As a matter of course, each religious leader will strive to outpace his competitors by exciting “disorderly affections of the human frame,” appealing to the most outlandish and superstitious doctrines. In this reading of things, religious passions are publicly disruptive, requiring at least some direction, and, perhaps more, a dampening. The solution is to “bribe [the leaders’] indolence” by fixing salaried offices, rendering this would-be contest in “ghostly practice” unnecessary. Hume concludes by observing that most establishments begin with religious justifications, though they prove useful for political interests and should be maintained on this basis.⁶

This argument involves some broad initial generalizations on Hume’s part. In speaking of religious matters in a more epistemological context elsewhere (say, in the *Enquiries*), he is quite circumspect regarding just how much of general causes can be known from limited effects.⁷ But in the *History*, Hume’s focus is passions and actions, not the truth of doctrines;⁸ thus more fitting parallel reflections emerge from his *Essays*, particularly *Of National Characters*, *Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences*, and *Of Commerce*. In the last-mentioned work, Hume cautions against the too-quick use of “abstruse” thought but supports nonetheless some theorizing in “general” subjects where “our speculations can scarcely ever be too fine, provided they be just.”⁹ This, he says, is a practical matter: “It is the chief business of philosophers to regard the general course of things. I may add, that it is also the chief business of politicians.”¹⁰ A similar claim appears in *Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences*, wherein Hume expresses higher confidence regarding the discernment of causes where forces operate on great numbers.¹¹ These observations usefully frame Hume’s most explicit, early treatment of the problem of religion in politics, his essay *Of Superstition and Enthusiasm* (SE). SE precedes the *History* by a decade and introduces

some basic themes regarding the political working of the passions. The *SE* analysis would have it that certain patterns are manifested in religious motivation. Hume classed older religious sects, suffused with ritual and dominated by priests, as “superstition,” producing “weakness, fear, melancholy, [and] ignorance.” His obvious target here is Roman Catholicism. By contrast he placed the newer Protestant sects—especially those derived from the teachings of Calvin—under the category of “enthusiasm.” These came from “hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance.”¹² Superstition and enthusiasm corrupt “true religion.” On this matter, Hume’s argument in *SE* follows the general tenor of his epistemology and historiography elsewhere: passions generate doctrines, and not the other way around. So the case at hand is that these species of passion would generate “false” religion, which would thereby carry forward into politics. Hume believed there was ample evidence in English history for this way of seeing things. From English events, one observes that enthusiasm flares up violently, settles down, and facilitates civil liberty in the process.¹³

A practical question for a reader of Hume concerns the “universality” of this turn of events; can a legislator count on its workings, or even encourage it? Further, should we attribute such developments to only *some* forms of religion but not necessarily to others? Hume’s response to these matters in *History* 3 involves a filling-out of some premises introduced in *SE*, particularly those pertaining to the “lower” or economic passions. In establishing a church, the politician deals with a persistent force, albeit one amenable to translation and redirection. To a great degree, religious motivation is tied up with a thirst for preeminence. The magistrate’s aim is to divert “metaphysical” impulses into economic ones, fixing a kind of “languid” default, and thereby preventing the machinations of enterprising innovators (*History* 3:136). Church establishment fosters political moderation, but not because religion itself has generated this moderation. Instead, Hume’s argument supposes that there is a natural middle in the passions from which religiously motivated politics depart. Fanaticism “decenters” us, so to speak. However, it is far from necessary—even given Hume’s economistic suppositions—that an establishment position should follow from the idea of a natural middle. This is clear from Adam Smith’s critique of Hume’s *History* 3 position, appearing in section 5 of Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*. Smith shares Hume’s view on the political dangers of religious enthusiasm but differs sharply from his proposed course of action.

ADAM SMITH: RELIGION, ECONOMY, AND HISTORY

Politically speaking, Adam Smith's goal for religion is similar to Hume's.¹⁴ In Smith's words, it is to foster "pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture, or fanaticism."¹⁵ Still, Smith advocates for religious liberty in the *Wealth of Nations* by *repudiating* Hume, and by concerning himself more with liberty than with moderation. After quoting Hume's *History* 3 argument at length, Smith advances a two-part explanation for the reduction of religious power. As an account of social moderation in religion, Smith's history is more consistent than Hume's, though it may be asked whether analytic rigor is purchased at the cost of moral subtlety. Smith observes that political goals are seldom the conscious ends for which states establish churches. As we have seen, Hume had already introduced this point. Yet Smith pushes it in a new direction, tracing the connection of religion and politics explicitly to conflict. The idea is not, as some in later centuries have it, that conflict vanishes without religion. It is instead that religion is the natural repository of, and vehicle for, inflamed passions. Each party "has either found it, or imagined it, for its interest, to league itself with some one or other of the contending religious sects" (792 [V.i.g.7]). Once one has "called in the aid of religion," then its tenets are magnified in power with the victory of the adopting party. Politics are in some manner "religious," then, as a matter of course.

In the face of this predicament, Smith suggests, it might be advantageous to have a multiplicity of sects, and concurrently to foster the development of individual conscience. By facilitating a "market" in faiths, a general moderation of enthusiasm will follow more effectively from competition than it would from an establishment, itself set in place by merely one dominant form of irrationality. Such irrationality follows from religion's very service to institutional ends, and from the ad hoc connections drawn between such ends and doctrine. Thus whether political parties actually "find it," or rather "imagine it," to be in their interest to enlist religion's help is never quite clear. If it is difficult for the philosopher to fix boundaries here, then it is more so for the politician. The politician must nonetheless act, and his directives are bound to be suffused, at least in part, with religious ideas. For this reason Smith doubts whether a law for complete religious toleration could be established in any country, since "positive law always has been, and probably always will be, more or less influenced by popular superstition and

enthusiasm" (793 [V.i.g.8]). Since neither the philosopher nor the politician can successfully distinguish "pure" religion from enthusiasm, the best one can do in facilitating the cause of moderation is to blunt some of the excesses of enthusiasm's "austere" morality by encouraging science and philosophy among the upper orders of society and by supplying "publick diversions" for the lower (796–97 [V.i.g.15–16]). There is one more part to Smith's policy: emoluments to clergy—if any—should be low and equal, redirecting the drive to preeminence into academic pursuit. Crucially, Smith did not think these prescriptions effective—especially the last—in just any circumstance (810–13 [V.i.g.39–41]).

If this were the entirety of Smith's case, it would be easy to adjudge his prescriptions inferior to Hume's. Smith's "moderate" religion would appear to be at best ineffectual, at worst a mere phantom. If rational religion is doomed to fall before popular superstition and enthusiasm, then why bother with its facilitation? Hume's strategy—by which one *owns* what cannot be rooted out—seems comparatively more sensible. Moreover, Smith's point on the equality of clerical offices appears as a mere adjustment of Hume's policy, or perhaps worse, a question-begging multiplier of its difficulties. Most obviously, it *presumes* an establishment—is Smith blatantly contradicting himself? Further, how and why does Smith apparently warrant a specifically *Presbyterian* establishment? The second part of Smith's account—its historical-materialist element—resolves these questions. Smith saw the Presbyterian Church as manifesting certain psychological and economic forces; his teleological reading of the historical record represents a clearer and more strongly formed doctrine than Hume's on the matter of religion.

Consider first that Hume saw religious passions not just as drivers of political extremism but also as being amenable to redirection through economic incentives. Importantly, he did not see them as being manageable *entirely* in this way. By contrast, Smith's position is both more modest and more daring. Its modest portion is in his insistence that *no one* can manage religious passions fully as a matter of conscious direction, independent of historical circumstance. This anti-Erastian element, then, appears even more strongly in Smith than in Hume. On the other hand, Smith's daring innovation is in the thesis that history and social development might accomplish what political design could not. He advances this idea by way of a long discursus on the property relations of the Catholic Church. The monopoly of the church on land created a "rent" both in money and in morality. The

moral economy of beneficial acts was perforce “cornered,” defined to suit one organization. Under such conditions, competition among religious views was impossible. The Reformation broke this monopoly, because developments in religion and morals were inseparable from those in land and commerce.

Smith’s brand of material historicism will strike most readers as a fore-runner of Marx. We should nonetheless avoid the conclusion that his terms were quite so determinist. Rather, this secularization account in the *Wealth of Nations* parallels the “invisible hand” appearing in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* IV:¹⁶ it describes the moral or economic aspects of individual actions as inadvertently generating social processes. Indeed, this “inadvertency” is perhaps Smith’s most important contribution to the Scottish tradition of “stadial” conjectural history.¹⁷ Unlike Marx and nineteenth-century materialists, there were for the Scots no clear delineations between political economy and morals, such that the latter could be described as a result (or perhaps even more strongly, as an epiphenomenon) of the former. Thus a better comparative figure for Smith’s theorizing here is Kant. As in Kant’s “guarantee” of perpetual peace, Smith argues that we might infer a plausible direction of events, and that this suffices morally for adopting a goal. Smith projects in *Wealth of Nations* that with the relative “independence” achieved through Protestantism in general, and Presbyterianism in particular, the economic and spiritual power of the Catholic Church “is now likely, in the course of a few centuries more, perhaps, to crumble into ruins altogether” (802–3 [V.i.g.24]). With the greater plurality in both economic and moral relations, individual conscience might develop, and liberty might grow. Implicit in this way of viewing things is a loose telos in which high-church establishment is an early, “anticivil” condition, later to be superseded by the contractual, Presbyterian understanding of conscience and political authority. Superstition is replaced by enthusiasm, which in its turn is moderated by means of competition. This competition is inherently generative of political liberty—at least if facilitated by wise policy. Still, as we noted above, this phenomenon will not emerge at just any juncture. The result is a political stance more broadly critical of establishment as a facilitator of moderation, particularly if the establishment in question is of the “superstitious” kind, involving Catholicism or high Anglicanism. There can be no hope that high religious institutions will produce lasting political moderation; this is to misunderstand their place.¹⁸ In Smith’s view, one cannot “bribe” religious

power, particularly when socioeconomic forces have yet to loosen its grip. But once such a loosening has occurred, then state measures (science, entertainments, low equality of clerical offices) may sustain and encourage what has already germinated.

An important point of contrast here involves the fact that, despite Hume's sharing the basic "story line" with Smith concerning species of Christianity and their political effects, he never submits this narrative to stadial analysis; unlike Smith, Hume never argues so strongly that economic and moral developments work in tandem.¹⁹ Neither in the *SE* nor later in the *Natural History of Religion* or *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, does Hume adopt an "economistic" teleology. This, in spite of the fact—to be discussed in more detail anon—that Hume was in all likelihood acutely aware of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* case. Instead, Hume declines to generalize in Smith's teleological fashion and rather leaves open the possibility that in some circumstances moral or political concerns might diverge from material-economic ones. This difference in generalizing follows from some basics of Hume's moral philosophy, which puts larger speculative impulses at arm's length, but it does so in a different manner than Smith's moral theory does. In moral description Smith focuses typically on *internal* mechanisms of the imagination.²⁰ His *speculative* inferences, meanwhile, prescind from this "second-person" frame; they are *external*, as in the present case of religion and history. As a consequence of this distinction, we may observe that Smith can with some justification plead that political direction of religion rests on historical observations of a character not explicitly moral (even if their objects of study are moral decisions). By contrast, Hume accounts for moral phenomena *themselves* solely in an external fashion, parsing or adjudging internal states by way of external facts. Lacking, and in fact rejecting, Smith's descriptive distinction, Hume reminds us throughout his writings that historical investigation is an inherently moral species of inquiry.²¹ Observer and actor are engaged in the same enterprise. For this reason Hume's psychological inferences tend to be both particular and negative, reticent on historical telos, and focusing instead on reoccurring behavior patterns.²² A signal instance of this interpretive strategy, especially as it concerns religious phenomena, can be found in the *Treatise*, where Hume advanced the striking claim that most people do not actually believe in an afterlife. To make his case, Hume pointed specifically to acts of religiously inspired violence:

There scarce are any, who believe the immortality of the soul with a true and establish'd judgment; such as is deriv'd from the testimony of travellers and historians. This appears very conspicuously wherever men have occasion to compare the pleasures and pains, the rewards and punishments of this life with those of a future; even tho' the case does not concern themselves, and there is no violent passion to disturb their judgment. The Roman Catholicks are certainly the most zealous of any sect in the christian world; and yet you'll find few among the more sensible people of that communion, who do not blame the Gunpowder treason, and the massacre of St. Bartholomew, as cruel and barbarous, tho' projected or executed against those very people, whom without any scruple they condemn to eternal and infinite punishments. All we can say in excuse for this inconsistency is, that they really do not believe what they affirm concerning a future state; nor is there any better proof of it than the very inconsistency.²³

This case exhibits Hume's typical emphasis on external description. We know that a concept like an eternal hereafter is so fully exceptional, so disconnected from regular experience, that the weakness in our associations makes belief impossible. Though this argument is psychological, its verification comes from the *absence* of behaviors that would follow upon the articulation of the belief: "religious" people condemn those behaviors that their religion would ostensibly demand.²⁴ Repeated instances of a disjunction between speech and behavior—and a lack of meaningful exceptions from this pattern—confirm the generalization. There is no historical process at issue; the settled disposition of coreligionists speaks against the natural prevalence of the belief in question. Hume thus concludes that real belief in a permanent hereafter requires an "artificial" state, as he would subsequently label such a condition in the dialogue appended to the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.²⁵ Hume's situational-analogical reasoning involves discrete inductive consideration of relevant events and resists comprehensive hypotheses of the sort one finds in Scottish conjectural history. An account like Smith's—unambiguously anti-Catholic and descriptively sweeping—simply cannot sit well with Hume's philosophy. So we might ask whether, in the absence of any larger historical arc for analysis, Hume might convincingly sketch a picture of religious passions in political life. Since religious enthusiasm and regular moral passions are both discernible

as matters of general observation, political treatment of them should reflect this uniformity. As it turns out, though, Hume's observations shift their emphasis, particularly when it comes to the classic problem of order versus liberty. A view of some themes from *History 5* demonstrates that these shifts were not merely products of a changing political outlook on Hume's part; they originated, too, in some interpretation of religious doctrine, despite Hume's attempt to avoid this. Here we find that extremity and "artificiality" in passion could explain only so much.

HISTORY 5: RELIGIOUS TUMULT AND LIBERTY

Hume's *History 5* account of the seventeenth-century religious Independents focuses more particularly on that troubled passage to civil liberty first detailed in *SE*. Here, however, one gets a much more acute presentation of the trade-offs between moderation or stability, on the one hand, and the possibility of civil improvement—albeit inadvertent—on the other. Hume's predicament is complicated by the fact that the latter half of this disjunction is evident only retrospectively. That is to say, in the present moment religious enthusiasm appears negatively and constitutes a civil problem. This much is true for the philosopher or historian and holds more strongly yet for the magistrate. Still, it could be argued that religious ideas carry a synoptic conception of social life and that their practical directives constitute propositions about nature, culture, or history. In this way of seeing things, one might say that such conceptions are "vindicated" by their practical success in fostering a good—such as civil liberty—subsequently valued by society at large. Given the tenor of Hume's views concerning not only religious truth but also epistemology and morals, it is understandable that this interpretive tack would not be his. That said, we are beset with additional difficulties when it comes to religion and politics because of the *extremity* with which Hume rejects this sort of practical-religious hermeneutic. He does not merely call the reasoning of the enthusiasts fallacious or misguided; he argues that their doctrines on toleration originated from no reasoning *at all*. It is a relevant question whether Hume is entitled to this conclusion; further, can he keep to it? In the following considerations, I will suggest that a negative answer to the second question weakens Hume's case for the first.

On these matters, it helps to look more closely at just what Hume was doing in *History 5*, particularly with respect to Presbyterians and

Independents. The political significance of their respective beliefs was that the Presbyterians insisted on some diminished, contractual ecclesiastic authority, whereas the Independents seemed to doubt the institutional salience of covenants altogether, beyond temporary expedience. Given this predicament, one might reasonably insist that a point of theology was at issue and that politique concerns would need to weigh it—but how? Is this possible on that same “external” mode of description that denied belief in the afterlife and presupposed the tractability of religious motives by security and money? Hume sketches the “genius” of the Independents with analyses of the new model army, the Treaty of Uxbridge, and the self-denying ordinance, among other events. He largely omits theology—at least at first—by repeating the basic theory of *SE*—that is, that religious fervor is a product of unnaturally enlivened passions. From here, he links the enlivening directly to emulation or competition: “Every man, as prompted by the warmth of his temper, excited by emulation, or supported by his habits of hypocrisy, endeavoured to distinguish himself beyond his fellows, and to arrive at a higher pitch of saintship and perfection. In proportion to its degree of fanaticism, each sect became dangerous and destructive; and as the independents went a note higher than the presbyterians, they could less be restrained within any bounds of temper and moderation” (*History* 5:441–42).²⁶

In *History* 3, Hume’s argument was that one might (and in fact *ought to*) channel the thirst for distinction into lower economic passions, preserving a “languid” institutional default. The Presbyterian and Independent forms of enthusiasm, though, seemed to resist any initial moderation, and Hume suggests that the differences between the two were matters *entirely* of “pitch.” His telling of the English Civil War revolves around the idea that no one *acting*—not Charles, not Cromwell, not the religious factions themselves—trusted in the establishment of his opponent’s religion, even under the most moderated policies. For Hume, then, the question is where the particular practice of toleration originates. His answer is that it comes from the inner direction of feeling attending this “higher pitch.” No external validation satisfies, and all efforts among men to set down enduring compacts, even for church maintenance, are distrusted:

The enthusiasm of the presbyterians led them to reject the authority of prelates, to throw off the restraint of liturgies, to retrench

ceremonies, to limit the riches and authority of the priestly office: The fanaticism of the independents, exalted to a higher pitch, abolished ecclesiastical government, disdained creeds and systems, neglected every ceremony, and confounded all ranks and orders. The soldier, the merchant, the mechanic, indulging the fervors of zeal, and guided by the illapses of the spirit, resigned himself to an inward and superior direction, and was consecrated, in a manner, by an immediate intercourse and communication with heaven. (*History* 5:442)

One obvious reply to this reading, from the side, perhaps, of a phenomenology of religion, would be to note that “inward turning” is a feature of many religious experiences. Traditionally, these experiences have been viewed as hermetic mysticism rather than as the germs of a practical, political skepticism. So, a problem Hume faces is whether the political view of the Independents ought to be understood as a foreseeable development, something about which the historian or politician might draw a generalization. Further, is this a force to be encouraged? *Should* Protestant enthusiasm have created toleration and institutional pluralism, and does it represent a phenomenon upon which we might rely? We have seen that Smith’s secularization theory permits us to say yes, because he describes the matter in stadial-economic terms, framing the question teleologically. Smith’s view justifies confidence in both the growth of liberty and the stability of a new political order. But how to receive Hume’s thinking is a matter of some greater puzzlement, since as we have seen, he eschews teleological projection. Many current readings of this situation assume that Hume’s focus was primarily toleration, though these readings differ on what normative conclusion we are to draw. There is an issue, in other words, concerning how enthusiasm is to be understood, even once we concede Hume’s point that it had some role in fostering liberty.

Greg Conti argues that Hume’s *SE* and *History* positions are actually different. In the first, toleration is an aftereffect of enthusiasm; in the second, it is tied up at some level psychologically with enthusiastic thoughts themselves. Conti believes that when writing *SE*, Hume believed religion to be on the wane, whereas by the time of his composition of *History* 5, he no longer held this to be true. He therefore had to account for toleration by interpreting enthusiastic doctrine itself. Such doctrine, though illogical, was

the means by which regular, nonphilosophical people came to toleration; in Conti's rendering, it is the "low road" to toleration.²⁷ Conti's work builds on that of Andrew Sabl, who sees toleration as one of Hume's "artificial virtues." Like other virtues of this kind, it develops apart from any planning or politique considerations of the magistrate, and it should thus never be viewed merely as a situational policy, at least not once it has arisen. Indeed, Sabl goes so far as to claim that Hume sees toleration as a "law of nature."²⁸ In a more modest interpretation, Richard Dees highlights the fact that the social attractiveness of toleration was not a logical consequence of its ideological articulations. Dees says Hume accounts for the formation of toleration by seeing it as a "compromise, born out of a long-lasting suffering."²⁹ Dees's "toleration" is thus a more precarious and situational phenomenon than Sabl's, even if the two concur on its artificiality. Neither sees Hume entertaining a psychological-doctrinal analysis of religious independency as Conti does.

These readings effectively frame a set of problems for Hume's position on tolerance and civil liberty. In them, we see that Hume's philosophical and historiographical predicament is limned not only by the question of progress but also by the issue of whether one can reliably understand internal religious commitments by way of external political events. The "bereft of reasoning" claim comports best with Dees's reading and would seem to circumvent the second matter, but Hume's inability to avoid all doctrinal interpretation indicates that Sabl's and Conti's concerns are far from misplaced. To decide among these views, we face the inevitable question of just what political goals ultimately most interested Hume. There is good reason to believe that Hume became even more concerned with civil order as he matured. It has long been noted that his reservations about Toryism lessened after the Jacobite defeat at Culloden attenuated its religious element.³⁰ More recently, James Harris has traced Hume's rightward drift amid the civil disturbances of the 1750s, sketching how these events resulted in a downplaying of consent in Hume's political writings.³¹ Frederick Whelan has compared Hume explicitly to Machiavelli, noting a constant tension in his work between "past-looking" emphasis on habit and a "forward-looking" utilitarianism.³² These authors' observations should lead us to understand, first, that Hume was indeed interested in normative prescriptions and, second, that such prescriptions had order and moderation in view as much as—if not more than—civil liberty or tolerance. He could not, therefore, advocate for independent enthusiasm without reservation—even in retrospect, even

in a “hedged” fashion. The problem is that enthusiasm’s products were not univocally positive, and Hume never quite isolates those positive elements as matters of cause and effect. He claims a uniqueness of commitment for Independency yet seems loath to attribute this uniqueness to doctrine: “Their mind, set afloat in the wide sea of inspiration, could confine itself within no certain limits; and the same variations, in which an enthusiast indulged himself, he was apt, by a natural train of thinking, to permit in others. Of all christian sects, this was the first, which, during its prosperity, as well as its adversity, always adopted the principle of toleration; and, it is remarkable, that so reasonable a doctrine owed its origin, not to reasoning, but to the height of extravagance and fanaticism” (*History* 5:289).

Here Hume’s broad commitment to external explanation lands him, and by extension, us, in a problem. The appeal to a “natural train of thinking” is not entirely convincing: Dees is undoubtedly correct when he points out the absence of logical implication from enthusiastic inspiration to tolerant social behavior. Additionally, there is the paradox that Hume is appealing to nature in order to account for something he has elsewhere described as “unnatural.” These problems notwithstanding, Hume generates a rather nuanced account of modern politics on the basis of this interpretation, particularly when he examines the events following the appearance and increased influence of Independency. Hume clearly understood that peaceful secularizing—and thus civil liberty—could not proceed under the independents, even if their doctrine played a role. Not content to neuter religious authority, they undermined political authority as well:

This sect, more ardent in the pursuit of liberty, aspired to a total abolition of the monarchy, and even of the aristocracy; and projected an entire equality of rank and order, in a republic, quite free and independent. In consequence of this scheme, they were declared enemies to all proposals for peace, except on such terms as, they knew, it was impossible to obtain. . . . By terrifying others with the fear of vengeance from the offended prince, they had engaged greater numbers into the opposition against peace, than had adopted their other principles with regard to government and religion. (*History* 5:290)

This is a penetrating description of a familiar modern paradox: that tolerance and liberty as first-order principles undermine trust, foster paranoia,

and, in turn, breed *intolerance*.³³ By this point, establishment could no longer fix through dampening what had been riven through a cycle of violent emotion and distrust. So not only did independency not imply tolerance logically; initially, at least, it positively *worked against* it as a matter of fact. The question is how one accounts conceptually for the directives to tolerance, openness, or other liberal social goods fostering such obviously *illiberal* outcomes. On this count Hume's reading is an interesting counterpoint to renderings of seventeenth-century religion by more contemporary, leftist historians. Christopher Hill, for instance, interprets the political disintegration of Calvinism in terms of a contradiction between the bourgeois doctrine of equality and an accompanying "suppressed premise" of election.³⁴ He sees this as a contradiction, albeit a pregnant one, generating a framework in which commoners gained assurance for the rectitude of their progressive impulses. Hill's main concern is not independency or "Puritanism" per se but the radical groups of the period (Diggers, Ranters, Quakers, Familists), and he explains their contributions as emerging within the possibilities of the time. So, like Hume, he stresses the importance of context. But Hill's "possibilities" are largely material; his telos, the development of egalitarian institutions. Arguably, Hill's is the more precise explanation—at least psychologically—concerning religion as a cause of social development, and perhaps, too, on why enthusiastic religion eventually "stalls" as an engine of progress. However, Hume's account appears less dated, at least to the present reader, even if it is two centuries older; strongly historicist explanations fail where author and reader lack a common notion of telos concerning the present. Nonetheless Hill's insight arises from his treating seriously the conceptual element of the radicals' theology (even if such theology is in his view a product of material conditions). So instead of adopting this sort of argument, Hume appears to be emphasizing the disruptive potential of calls for purity, even if such demands are for purity in tolerance; this exacerbates the inherent potential for disorder where a common telos is missing—not just for readers and authors but, more importantly, for actors as well.

Other thinkers have dealt with this problem arising from a lack of substantive judgments in common and have resorted not to history but to some presumed mode of common calculation. From Thomas Hobbes to Immanuel Kant, this "contractual" ideational element seen in the Presbyterians came to the fore. In rejecting this approach, then, Hume was an "Independent" of a sort, distrustful of civil compacts.³⁵ He aimed, however,

at an “unenthusiastic” independency—an independency, to put the matter in Hutchesonian terms, of “calm passions.”³⁶ This resulted in an analysis, the sympathies of which lay decidedly outside of those held by its subjects. Hume weighed countervailing forces “unenthusiastically,” and nowhere was this expressed with more clarity than in his treatment of Archbishop William Laud, a chief opponent of Independent influence. In Hume’s treatment of Laud we find evidence of both the strengths and the shortcomings of his “external” interpretation of politics and religion.

Laud’s tenure as a prelate, culminating with his accession to archbishop of Canterbury under Charles I, was marked by steady resistance to the spirit of Puritanism developing in the church. From an academic temperament and Arminian orientation, Laud introduced liturgical and ritual changes directly opposed to the reformed Calvinist worship found in many areas of the country by the 1630s. And at a time when fighting in Ireland and on the Continent had induced a wave of fear concerning “popery,” Laud’s tolerance of Catholics was considered by many an unnecessary and egregious affront, especially when he expelled from the English Church many who declined his revanchist policies. Laud was imprisoned at the behest of Parliament, and after several years’ time (and in Hume’s view, on specious charges) he was executed. Laud attempted, and ultimately failed, humanely to temper a species of religious enthusiasm, albeit by means detested by much of his flock. Hume’s sympathy for him is therefore revealing. Though generally striving in *History* 5 to vindicate the effects of Protestant enthusiasm on politics, Hume treats Laud so as to reinforce partly his *History* 3 establishment position. He does this by illustrating the absurdities inherent in adopting toleration as a telos, without a context to grant it meaning. Hume finds both irony and profundity in the fate of a man like Laud, whose traditional theological sympathies led him to introduce *some* toleration, only to suffer for that fact. “Toleration had hitherto been so little the principle of any christian sect, that even the catholics, the remnant of the religion professed by their fore-fathers, could not obtain from the English the least indulgence. . . . And the enemies of the church were so fair from the beginning, as not to lay claim to liberty of conscience, which they called a toleration for foul murder” (5:459).

In Hume’s view toleration is plainly not a “natural” thought. Instead, there is party attachment and loyalty. Toleration is in this context an admission of weakness; Hume sees this position in the Presbyterians. When experience intervenes with violence, though, one is still left with the problem of *what*

to tolerate. Hume's judgment on this question involves a citation of Montesquieu's maxim that "a sect, already formed and advanced, may, with good reason, demand a toleration" (*History* 5:459). Peace itself seems to demand as much. This premise fits well with Hume's philosophy, where long-standing arrangements have moral weight.³⁷ The Presbyterians, though, cut themselves off from tradition, and the Independents went further, eschewing even the social ties of the present in favor of direct inspiration. So Hume's position could not be theirs; they could demand toleration *politically* or *rationally* only on pain of absurdity. This fact, however, is difficult to square with the contention that the Independents' enthusiasm had led them "by a natural train of thinking" to extend freedom of conscience to others. The problem, politically speaking, was that any attachment of others to traditions, truths, or conclusions different from the ones the enthusiasts had reached was seen as a threat to their freedom of conscience. Thus the predicament of Laud, who, as Hume was quick to point out, never actually denied the Independents the right to assemble and worship outside of the official Church:

The maxims, however, of his administration were the same that had ever prevailed in England. . . . To have changed them for the modern maxims of toleration, how reasonable soever, would have been deemed a very bold and dangerous enterprize. It is a principle advanced by president Montesquieu, that, where the magistrate is satisfied with the established religion, he ought to repress the first attempts towards innovation, and only grant a toleration to sects that are diffused and established. . . . According to this principle, Laud's indulgence to the catholics, and severity to the puritans, would admit of apology. I own, however, that it is very questionable, whether persecution can in any case be justified: But, at the same time, it would be hard to give that appellation to Laud's conduct, who only enforced the act of uniformity, and expelled the clergymen that accepted of benefices, and yet refused to observe the ceremonies, which they previously knew to be enjoined by law. He never refused them separate places of worship; because they themselves would have esteemed it impious to demand them, and no less impious to allow them. (*History* 5:575–76 [Note FF])

Reflection on Laud's *mitigated* toleration led Hume to agree partly with Montesquieu, discarding the business of repressing new sects. Laud's

opponents, meanwhile, embraced absurdities the moment they would enter into a public debate on the matter of being tolerated. How can one object to exclusion from church organizations when one rejects, as a matter of principle, *organization itself*? How can one object to another's being tolerated when one stands for complete liberty? Paradoxes aside, philosophical cogency was not the only consideration for Hume, and illogic was hardly unique to Protestant enthusiasts. While he yearned elsewhere for an extinction of popular religion, in the *History* Hume seemed to accept its inevitable persistence. Smith proposed to dampen the "austere" and "gloomy" parts of religion with science and popular entertainments. Hume, sticking to his more "managerial" or politique approach, argued in *History* 5 that the "dampening" would need to happen from within religion itself:

Whatever ridicule, to a philosophical mind, may be thrown on pious ceremonies, it must be confessed, that, during a very religious age, no institutions can be more advantageous to the rude multitude, and tend more to mollify that fierce and gloomy spirit of devotion, to which they are subject. Even the English church, though it had retained a share of popish ceremonies, may justly be thought too naked and unadorned, and still to approach too near the abstract and spiritual religion of the puritans. Laud and his associates, by reviving a few primitive institutions of this nature, corrected the error of the first reformers, and presented to the affrightened and astonished mind, some sensible, exterior observances, which might occupy it during its religious exercises, and abate the violence of its disappointed efforts. (5:459–560)

Hume's chief criticism of Laud was that he acted "not with the enlarged sentiments and cool reflection of a legislator, but with the intemperate zeal of a sectary." This, however, seems too fine a psychological point to put on behavior that, by Hume's own admission, was bound for a less-than-charitable reception from Laud's adversaries. Also, many of Laud's reforms met Hume's or Smith's "politic" concerns. For instance, in addition to his changes to the altar and the prayer book, Laud had directed a loosening of behavioral strictures on the Sabbath, reincorporating feasts and other communal celebrations. Like Smith, he sought to dispel "gloom" and severity. Hume does not say that another policy could have averted civil war, but he does seem to be underscoring the general point that religious thinking was inadequate to politics.

That said, we are still left with the puzzle of whether a fully secular political-historical theory can generate meaningful political norms concerning the management of religion, without itself delving into the particulars of religious doctrine. In this matter, the positions we have surveyed from the secondary literature produce some answers, albeit unsatisfying ones. Conti's "dual position" reading is correct in noting that Hume needs an interpretation of enthusiastic doctrine, but there is little reason to conclude that this problem did not exist at the *SE* stage as well as at the *History* one. Further, our above observations would have it that Hume tilted *away* from liberty and tolerance as a political good in the 1750s, not toward it. All of this is to say that the *History* treatments should be viewed as an exploration of an ongoing concern, not as the product of a shifted estimation of the power of religion. Hume can fall back neither on a historical progression nor on a retrenchment as solutions to what is arguably a more basic hermeneutic issue. This observation plays even more strongly against Sabl and Dees. Sabl's "artificial virtue" position is that Hume is rejecting *politique* management of religion. But we have argued that such management is precisely what Hume leaves open, even if he concedes its difficulty. Further, in Hume's philosophy artificial virtues are fundamental to political society and are not mere addenda. If religious toleration is an artificial virtue, it is a very special one on Hume's account. The point is not merely that political society can do without it, which Hume clearly believed. It is also not just that Hume's "Tory" sympathies led him increasingly to concern himself somewhat more with order than with liberty. Rather, the peculiarity is in the fact that *all* artificial virtue for Hume involves a backlog of unconscious, common performance. But religious argument is about the meaning and value of those patterns themselves. Religious debate involves specifically those things about which Hume's entire philosophy is skeptical: notions of the good.

Thus the difference between Conti's position and Dees's is important. Dees correctly highlights the "externalist" strain of Hume's theory, which hesitates to ascribe behavior directly to ideas. According to this way of seeing things, there is no *inherent* reason why toleration should result from this doctrine or that, one set of practices or another. Nonetheless, Conti is right that Hume is brought to engage in psychological speculation on doctrine and to posit a kind of logic: the independents acted on the basis of a "natural train of thinking." If this is a "just generalization," it is hardly a just *Humean* generalization. Hume's establishment position cannot avoid a critical kind

of tension: between a thoroughgoing external, empiricist analysis of religion as blind passions, on the one hand, and a necessary interpretation—and perhaps even *evaluation*—of doctrine, on the other. Whether a figure like Laud is ultimately to be praised or excused for what followed his policies is dependent upon our assessment not just of his own doctrines but also of the ones held by those he opposed. It does not appear that Hume resolved, or even *could* resolve, this problem. The one thing evidently consistent in his view is that he resisted any adoption of a telos, even an indirect one like Smith's.

HISTORY, RELIGION, AND THE POLITICAL GOOD

The foregoing discussion highlights the fact that in discussing the public effects of religion, Hume is concerning himself with the classical political question of liberty and order, though in a manner that turns upon some difficult questions of historical interpretation. The *History* 3 account states rather unambiguously that a magistrate is to manage political passions through establishment. This prescription, however, would seem to be in some practical tension with the connection of religious enthusiasm to civil liberty in *History* 5. For even if the latter extends Hume's worries on the danger of religion, it does so by noting that establishment logic is apparently less than universally operable. Hume never embraces Smith's late Presbyterian accommodation outright as a guarantor of toleration. But nor does his partial approval of Laud bespeak an unqualified high-church political allegiance. Thus the relatively brief take on the issue in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, with which we began, only confirms that Hume had reached a point of some ambivalence. Having worked on the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* right up to his death, and having read *Wealth of Nations*, Hume was surely aware of Smith's criticism of his *History* 3 position. This did not convince him that he was wrong, though we can read Philo's statement as perhaps incorporating some of Smith's worries. In having Philo say that there is no overarching political plan to be followed, it may seem that Hume has perhaps even *adopted* Smith's position, but we should remember that establishment of one sect did not—in Hume's view—entail intolerance of others. Philosophical indifference is certainly not for Hume political indifference, and the *History* 3 position was exactly that political favor restrained pretension. One might, therefore, establish one church

and at the same time tolerate others. However, Hume never advances this policy unambiguously. If it is to be surmised, we must do so indirectly from his hedged sympathy with Laudianism. As we have seen, though, Hume hesitates to derive overarching lessons from Laud's policies. In light of such indecision, which I have sketched here as a function of Hume's "external" hermeneutic, one must conclude against any positive tutelary function for religion. Thus if Whelan is right concerning a "forward-looking" element of utility in Hume's political thought, then religion cannot be a tool in its service. Sahl has suggested that that for Hume redirection of passion induces adherence to an "enlarged," "proto-Millian sense of fallibilism." With religion, this means missionary zeal comes to be associated with tolerance rather than with factional quarrel.³⁸ It is evident that Hume does in fact think this happened in the aftermath of the Independents, though the reasons for it remain obscure. What's more, it may be argued that Conti's "aftereffects" observation still holds some truth: only when independent enthusiasm had "burned out" did the brutal part of its political relativism subside. With this in mind, "dampening" and "attenuation" seem to be better choices for describing Hume's strategy than does "redirection." Lacking the insight to predict specific developments as outgrowths of religious doctrine, the safer course in both hermeneutic and practical terms was to restrain any public claims made on its behalf. Duncan Forbes argued that Hume's political position was fully "institutional," eschewing Machiavellian (or more proximately, Fergusonian) concerns with public morals.³⁹ One needn't embrace the whole of this view to consider that it applied in some uneven manner to Hume's posture on religion. "Popular" religion might *damage* critical institutions (and perhaps inhibit morals, too), but it did not and could not sustain them. Religious institutions, as would-be *moral* ones, could not be trusted. Still, this observation fails to resolve Hume's difficulties. The problem is that his interpretive quandary touches also on the business of restraining pretension; it remains unclear whether establishment is generally the best avenue to achieve such restraint.

At this juncture, I want to avoid the suggestion that Hume's dilemma in hermeneutics—between external interpretation and piecemeal psychologizing—is fully a weakness in his approach. There is something admirable in Hume's empirical care: his refusal of the historicist frame reduces the dehumanizing hazards of one species of ideological generalization. His perceptive analysis of the Independents demonstrates that some political goals

unmoored—especially tolerance, freedom, equality—have a dark side. To establish this, however, Hume is forced in spite of himself to take some of independency's doctrinal claims on their face, adopting their associations as his own. Without these suppositions, there would seem to be little reason to connect the development of civil liberty to the religion of the Independents, rather than solely to the violence in which they participated.

These interpretive virtues notwithstanding, we must also apportion to Hume's external historical analysis at least *some* blame for generating that stubborn, late modern insistence on treating all religion, and all religious conflicts, as matters of raw emotion. "Religion" as discussed politically has become a monolith, or perhaps a monochromatic scale of moderation and extremity, with doctrine itself irrelevant. Jennifer Herdt explains this rather powerfully by noting that Hume's tendency to "causal explanations which sidestep actors' internal reasons" has the ironic effect of undermining his moral emphasis on sympathy, creating a "faction" resembling the religious ones of which he was critical. She remarks that Hume treats religion—at least politically—as irrational and self-evidently false, such that it requires special explanation.⁴⁰ She adds that Hume "dismembered theistic belief."⁴¹ That is, he isolated purely religious questions from social ones, creating a space where theological disputes were rendered independent of practical ramification. In this view, the purpose of Hume's philosophy of religion was to shape the public definition of religion so as to minimize its impact. If the above considerations are correct, then Hume sustains the same political goal in his more explicitly concrete and institutional arguments on religion.

Whether or not one concurs with Hume's assessment of the inherent irrationality of religion (at least of the "popular" sort), I hope to have demonstrated some limitations in the mode of analysis associated with it. Hume assists us in careful investigation, reminding us that sensible politics are often derailed by religion. However, preventing this outcome requires that we augment our reflections with decidedly non-Humean considerations, even if healthy secular politics is a goal. We may accept, with Hume, that religious doctrine is inadequate and often conflicted as an explanation of political action and that its influence ought somehow to be hedged against. Nonetheless it would seem that we do not escape questions concerning political goals or the fact that not all religions bespeak or support equally those goods to which we are accustomed. In light of our present (multi)cultural difficulties, we do well to see that there is no

avoiding the question of the good at the heart of religion. Civil liberty itself rests on how we answer it.⁴²

NOTES

1. David Hume, *Principal Writings on Religion, Including Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 121 (12.10).

2. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 125 (12.21).

3. See William Lad Sessions, *Reading Hume's Dialogues* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 182–206 for a précis of part 12 “reversal” issues. J. C. A. Gaskin's *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978) and Keith Yandell's *Hume's “Inexplicable Mystery”* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990) also treat the history of these problems and present competing readings on Hume's philosophy of religion. Alexander Brodie, *The Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001), 128–40, argues that many of Hume's premises are compatible with those of the Calvinism he ostensibly criticizes, and that we should conclude that Hume was agnostic at the least (and not simply an atheist). I take no particular position on these quarrels here, or on the broader issues of Hume's philosophy of religion. I proceed from the understanding that whatever Hume's metaphysics or private faith might have been, his general disposition to religion as an element of public life was negative.

4. Hume's remarks on religious institutions within the *History* are too numerous to survey fully here. I focus on the 3.29 statement because it is his most cogent *philosophical* statement on the matter, and it has been received, by Smith most directly, as encapsulating Hume's thoughts on the issue.

5. David Hume, *The History of England* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983), 3:134–35. Subsequent citations of *History* refer to volumes and pages in this edition.

6. Hume, *History of England*, 3:134–35.

7. See, for instance David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. T. L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 189–94 (11.9–23), where Hume establishes this point with respect to

metaphysical or theological conjectures on the divine. The present issue concerns the apparently more concrete matter of passions and their political effects. A difficulty, however, lies in the fact that these are passions *about* theological conjectures. The question is therefore whether we can explain and generalize regarding these passions without entering into conjectures about those conjectures.

8. The reader will note that I interpret Hume's “true religion” chiefly as a practical term, irrespective of its epistemological import. There are more and less morally expansive interpretations of this concept. See A. C. Willis, “The Potential Use-Value of Hume's ‘True Religion,’” *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2015): 1–15, and Jennifer Marusic, “Refuting the Whole System? Hume's Attack on Popular Religion in ‘The Natural History of Religion,’” *Philosophical Quarterly* 62, no. 249 (2012): 715–36, respectively, for examples. Don Garrett, “What's True About Hume's ‘True Religion?’,” *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2012): 199–220, makes a compelling case that Hume's intent—at least in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*—was in fact epistemological. On the present reading, Hume's most important concern is at least compatible with this claim, since the appearance of true religion would render men's passions consonant with nature, which is merely to say, devoid of fanaticism and thus error.

9. David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), 254.

10. Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, 254. See also Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 150–52 (8.7–12).

11. Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, 112.

12. Hume, 74.

13. Greg Conti, “Hume's Low Road to Toleration,” *History of Political Thought* 36, no. 1 (2015): 165–91, suggests that Hume changes his mind on the question of whether enthusiasm itself or instead its aftereffects generate

toleration. On my interpretation, this ambivalence is a consequence of Hume's mode of interpretation and does not necessarily reflect a change in his assessment of events.

14. The traditional impression that Smith maintains a more favorable posture to religion than Hume has come under increasing scrutiny. See Gavin Kennedy, "Adam Smith on Religion," in *Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, ed. Christopher J. Berry, Maria Pia Paganelli, and Craig Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 464–84. Hume's animus is best captured by his abortive foray into Swiftian satire, the "Bellmen's Petition." See M. A. Stewart, "Hume's 'Bellmen's Petition': The Original Text," *Hume Studies* 23, no. 1 (1997): 3; and Roger L. Emerson, "Hume and the Bellman, Zerobabel MacGilchrist," *Hume Studies* 23, no. 1 (1997): 9–28. There appears little reason to think either philosopher seriously entertained traditional religious positions.

15. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner, and W. B. Todd (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1981), 793 (V.i.g.8). Subsequent citations of this work refer to pages in this edition followed by numerals indicating book, chapter, and sometimes subdivisions of chapters.

16. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1982), 183–85 (IV.1.10). Subsequent citations of this work refer to pages in this edition followed by numerals indicating part, section (only in parts I, II, VI, and VII), chapter, and paragraph.

17. In arguing for "stages" in human social development, Smith joined Robertson, Kames, and Millar, among others. For a discussion of Scottish "four-stage" speculative history, see J. G. A. Pocock, "Adam Smith and History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 270–87; and Paul Bowles, "The Origin of Property and the Development of Scottish Historical Science," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46 (1985): 197–210.

18. Andrew Sabl, "The Last Artificial Virtue: Hume on Toleration and Its Lessons," *Political Theory* 37, no. 4 (2009): 511–38 reads Hume's theory as approaching this conclusion, generating a parallel not only between Hume and Smith on tolerance but also between Hume's

positions on tolerance and justice. For reasons explored anon, this appears to the present author as too strong a conclusion.

19. In *Of Refinement in the Arts* Hume argued that high degrees of politeness and moral refinement are tied inextricably to ages and nations of "luxury." He nonetheless anticipated the "declinist" or "decadence" arguments later articulated by Kames or Ferguson in specifying that there was "vicious" luxury as well as virtuous. Even if material development was a necessary condition for moral development, it was clearly not a sufficient one. Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, 268–80.

20. See Maria Carrasco, "Hutcheson, Smith, and Utilitarianism," *Review of Metaphysics* 64, no. 3 (2011): 515–53 on the implications of Smith's internal focus on moral description.

21. See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. T. L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80 (2.12); Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 150–51 (8.7–8); and of course Hume, *Of the Study of History*, in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, 563–69.

22. Not coincidentally, Hume stresses in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* dialogue that there has never been "any considerable innovation in the primary sentiments of morals" (193 [Dialogue: 36]). On the constancy of human nature, see also Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 150–51 (8.7–8).

23. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 79 (1.3.9.14).

24. From the standpoint of religion, this is a telling instance of Hume's failure to parse the realm of the "ostensible" correctly: does Christian doctrine provide for no variation in permissible action from inspiration? The *Treatise* argument would seem to assume that killing for salvation and foreknowledge of damnation had broad theological sanctions.

25. Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 197–99 (Dialogue: 52–57).

26. Hume also sees vanity as a force in the development of miracle stories in *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 175 (10.17).

27. Conti, "Hume's Low Road."

28. Sabl, "Last Artificial Virtue," 513.

29. Richard Dees, "'The Paradoxical Principle and Salutory Practice': Hume on Toleration," *Hume Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005): 158–59 quotes Hume's remarks at *History of England*, 5:130 to this effect, claiming that "battle fatigue" brings a "conversion" to a more practical, secular mindset. My argument shares with Conti's and Sabl's a basic suspicion of the moral sufficiency of this explanation.
30. H. R. Trevor-Roper and J. Robertson, *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 120–28.
31. J. A. Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 429–33.
32. F. G. Whelan, *Hume and Machiavelli: Political Realism and Liberal Thought* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004), 151–52.
33. Arguably, the ancients noticed, too: "Too much freedom seems to change into nothing but too much slavery"; Plato, *Republic* 9, 564a3 (trans. Allan Bloom [New York: Basic Books, 1991], 242).
34. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 339–43.
35. Readers of Hume's religious politics often seem to ignore *Of the Original Contract*. Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, 465–87.
36. Willis, "Hume's True Religion," 8, considers this also to be the character of Hume's "true religion."
37. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 326 (3.2.3.9); Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 92 (3.33).
38. Andrew Sabl, *Hume's Politics: Coordination and Crisis in the History of England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 55–59.
39. Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 224–30.
40. Jennifer Herdt, *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 187–88.
41. Jennifer Herdt, "Opposite Sentiments," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 16, no. 3 (1995): 258.
42. The author would like to thank the editors and reviewers of *Diametros*, where an earlier version of this chapter first appeared in a special issue on the Enlightenment and secularization. See Aaron Szymkowiak, "Hume on Church Establishments, Secular Politics, and History," *Diametros* 54 (2017): 95–117, <http://www.diametros.iphils.uj.edu.pl/index.php/diametros/article/view/1135>.

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Rousseau's Civil Religion "Problem"

JOHN RAY

I.

Chapter 1 of Ronald Beiner's ambitious study of the dialogue among philosophers on civil religion is called "Rousseau's Problem," and it begins by acknowledging that "the term civil religion comes from a particular text—chapter 8 in book 4 of Rousseau's *Social Contract*." Pride of place is given to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's chapter on civil religion, but Beiner later returns to Rousseau to discuss the Profession of Faith (the Vicar's tale of "natural" religion in book 4 of *Emile*) in the first half of a chapter called "The Gods of the Philosophers II." Beiner observes that Rousseau's "problem" is the same for both civil and natural religion:

In Part I of this book, I expressed my skepticism that the deist creed formulated at the end of the *Social Contract* counts as a real civil religion, not least as judged by Rousseau's own standards of a real religion. My view remains the same in the present context [the Profession of Faith]. As Rousseau himself intimates in the examples that animate his discussions in the *Social Contract* and *The Government of Poland* (Moses, Lycurgus, Numa, Mohammed, and Calvin), a real civil religion requires something considerably more robust (and considerably more divisive) than the deism of *Emile*.¹

Not only are the examples from the *Social Contract* and the *Government of Poland* real religions, they are (or, importantly, *were*) religions of particular states and cultures, “in essence exclusive and national.” Beiner finds that Rousseau wants “‘a cult which is . . . national’ and that enforces the cultural differences between human beings, but he also wants a generic deism that promotes toleration and gives human beings an appreciation of the universality of a shared human religiosity. That is, he both wants and does not want a civil religion!” Beiner points out that in the *Profession of Faith* Rousseau criticizes the sort of national particularism he had celebrated in the *Government of Poland*: “[Wanting] an exclusive form of worship [and wanting] God to have said to me [or to my people—R. B.] what He had not said to others” is for Rousseau a sign of educational prejudice and human vanity (*amour-propre*) rather than clear thinking about the divinity. Thus in *Emile*, “Rousseau is an Enlightened debunker of the ‘prejudices of the country in which one is born’ [while] in his political works, he enthusiastically endorses them.”²

Paul A. Rahe’s well-written book *Soft Despotism, Democracy’s Drift* reaches the same conclusion: “The ‘purely civil Religion’ proposed in the *Social Contract* is an attempt to square the circle. As he put it not long after that work’s publication, his aim therein was to ‘reaffirm all dogmas of every good Religion, all the dogmas useful to society, whether universal or particular,’ and to ‘omit the others.’ In practice, however, such a compromise between universality and particularity is unworkable, and Rousseau knew it.” Rahe believes Rousseau was less than sincere in his praise of classical antiquity (and thus of the particularity demanded by good republican politics, including a particular civil religion). “We are left to wonder,” he says, “whether for Rousseau classical antiquity is anything more than a stick with which to beat bourgeois modernity.”³

Rousseau as depicted by Beiner and Rahe is hopelessly conflicted, if not altogether incoherent. If, for Rahe, Rousseau knew his civil religion was an attempt to do the impossible (square the circle), for Beiner the “problem” revealed by Rousseau’s civil religion goes to the core of Rousseau as a thinker: “Rousseau was the author not of a single coherent political philosophy but of several mutually incompatible political philosophies.” For Beiner, “the key line in his work is this: ‘Common readers, pardon me my paradoxes. When one reflects, they are necessary.’ That is, life itself is paradoxical, and the chief vocation of the theorist is to give expression to this paradoxically.”⁴

Those of Beiner's readers who are familiar with Rousseau's major texts will certainly wonder whether there is not more inner consistency to Rousseau's thought than he suggests, and they will also wonder whether his characterization of the philosopher's activity is not grossly inadequate.

Beiner and Rahe are not the first readers to see serious difficulties in the structure and the substance of the chapter. Long ago Hilail Gildin recognized the central tension in Rousseau's analysis: "Now, while self-preservation may supply political society with its purpose, it cannot make political society sacred. Civil religion is necessary for that end. But the spirit of Christianity is incompatible with any civil religion."³ If there is nothing new in the Beiner/Rahe discovery of Rousseau's "problem," nonetheless Beiner especially deserves credit for highlighting it in his important book on civil religion and for his clear insistence on the unavailability of a Rousseauian solution to "Rousseau's problem"—that is, a solution compatible with Rousseau's own analysis of the relation of religion and politics.

I suggest that the historical influence of this famous chapter should indicate to us that Beiner's reading does not pay sufficient attention to Rousseau's larger intention in writing it in the way that he did. Beiner is especially surgical in his reading, which gives his analysis a laser-like quality, yet his judgment of Rousseau's chapter as a complete failure is contradicted by the historical importance of Rousseau's treatment of civil religion. On Beiner's reading it would seem that Rousseau had no choice but to put himself in a logical straitjacket for all his critics to see. Admittedly, one would have to be boneheaded to deny that there is a question whether the parts can be reconciled from within the chapter alone. Yet Beiner's suggestion that Rousseau was left scratching his head in bewilderment is not persuasive. The paradoxical Rousseau knew exactly what he was doing in his civil religion chapter, as he did elsewhere in his large oeuvre. And when we reflect on just how massively influential Rousseau's chapter on civil religion has been (impossible to overstate, I believe), it is even harder not to think that Rousseau was right to leave the chapter exactly as he did. Perhaps instead of asking whether the chapter parts cohere, we should ask whether Rousseau achieved his intention.

I believe that the chapter in the *Social Contract* makes sense when it is read in light of Rousseau's well-known claim of the historical moral corruption of modern regimes. It can be read as advice on what to do in the face of widespread moral decline. The problem of the durability of regimes

intensifies in times of extreme moral corruption—that is, when traditional religious teachings and the authorities (priests and ministers) that claim the sole power to interpret them are no longer believed (due in Rousseau's time to the acceptance by intellectual elites of the atheistic philosophy of the Enlightenment). In addition, I believe that Alexis de Tocqueville, although heavily dependent on the *Social Contract*, did show conclusively that Rousseau got it wrong about the capacity of Christianity to serve as a civil religion, at least for American democracy. Before addressing these issues, I will briefly summarize the chapter and the critiques of Rousseau by Beiner, Rahe, and Gildin.

II.

Beiner's analysis insists on an internal contradiction between the first thirty paragraphs and the last five paragraphs that supposedly results from contrary political philosophies held by Rousseau. The chapter has three sections: in paragraphs 1–16 Rousseau provides a condensed overview of the history of “religion considered in relation to society,” paragraphs 17–30 consider “three sorts of religion politically,” and paragraphs 31–35 return from “political considerations” to “political right” to establish the dogmas of the civil religion.⁶

At first every political society had its own God, and there were as many Gods as peoples. There were no wars of religion because “every State, since it had its own cult as well as its Government, drew no distinction between its Gods and its laws. . . . The God of one people had no right over the other peoples.” The unity of political society was fractured by Jesus: “Jesus came to establish a Spiritual Kingdom on earth; which, by separating the theological from the political system, led to the State's ceasing to be one, and caused the intestine divisions, which have never ceased to convulse Christian peoples.”⁷

Rousseau lauds Thomas Hobbes's effort to reclaim the lost political unity: “Hobbes was the only one who clearly saw the evil and the remedy, who dared to propose reuniting the two heads of the eagle, and to return everything to political unity, without which no State or Government will ever be well constituted.” Yet Rousseau rejects Hobbes's solution as unworkable: “The domineering spirit of Christianity [is] inconsistent with his system.”⁸ It is important to understand what Rousseau meant by this to know exactly why he could not accept Hobbes's solution to the theological-political problem. As Hilail Gildin explains:

[Hobbes's] remedy would consist in giving the civil sovereign the kind of authority over otherworldly matters that he already enjoys over this-worldly ones. The kings who made themselves the heads of the churches in their dominions did not gain such authority because they did not acquire the right to legislate in religious matters. As heads of the church in their dominions, their power was limited to administering the affairs of their church without making any changes in it. The power to make such changes, that is, legislative power, effectively resided in these postpagan religions, in the body of the clergy. In spite of his praise of Hobbes's remedy, Rousseau does not see how it could possibly win popular acceptance.⁹

Hobbes's solution to the theological-political problem was then for Rousseau theoretically sound but politically impracticable. Rousseau's own proposal would need to take a more workable path and be sufficiently flexible to fit the reality of Christian Europe.

Rousseau next makes two fundamental points: "No State has ever been founded without Religion serving as its base" and "Christian law is at bottom more harmful than useful to a strong constitution of the State." Putting these two claims together produces the unmistakable conclusion: the Christian religion cannot be a civil religion. Rousseau announces he will develop his thinking "to make [him]self fully understood." Religion, which is either "general or particular"—which I take to mean either Christian or pagan—"can also be divided into two kinds, namely, the Religion of man and that of the Citizen." The religion of man is the "Religion of the Gospel, true Theism." The religion of the citizen is "inscribed in a single country" and "extends the rights and duties of man only as far as its altars." A third kind of religion is the "religion of the Priest." This "bizarre sort" of religion gives men "two legislations, two chiefs, two fatherlands, subjects them to contradictory duties and prevents their being at once devout and Citizens."¹⁰ Rousseau has in mind not only Roman Christianity but Protestant sects as well.¹¹

Rousseau denounces the pure religion of the Christian gospel as strongly as he does the religion of the priest, even though the pure form of Christianity, without temples and altars and priests, does not threaten to divide sovereignty. What it does do is make it "difficult to love one's own people more than one loves other peoples."¹² The true Christian "cannot, without ceasing to be a true Christian, love anything this-worldly as passionately as

Rousseau requires the citizens of a well-constituted city to love it.”¹³ Thus the true Christian cannot at all times be a good citizen.¹⁴ Rousseau asks the critical question, “Does a foreign war break out? [True Christian citizens] march to battle without hesitation, not one of them thinks of fleeing; they do their duty, but without passion for victory; they know better how to die than to win. . . . Pit against them those generous peoples who were consumed by ardent love of glory and of fatherland, suppose your Christian republic confronting Sparta or Rome; the pious Christian will be beaten, crushed, destroyed before they have time to realize what is happening to them.”¹⁵ Rousseau goes further: “True Christians are made to be slaves; they know it and are hardly moved by it, this brief life has too little value in their eyes.”¹⁶ Rousseau does not allow any escape hatch for Christianity: whether in its pure form or in its established form, it is unequivocally harmful to political life. He thus underscores rather vehemently that Christianity cannot serve as the civil religion of a healthy state.

The third section of the chapter is a turn from “political considerations” to “right” in an attempt to “fix the principles on this important point.” The right of the sovereign power does not exceed the limits of public utility, and public utility includes a public profession of faith in a religion that makes citizens love their duties. The dogmas of the civil religion are those of morality and obligation to others. “Beyond this everyone may hold whatever opinions he pleases, without it being up to the Sovereign to know them. For since the Sovereign has no competence in the other world, whatever the subjects’ fate may be in the life to come is none of its business, provided they are citizens in this life.” The content of Rousseau’s civil religion (coming late in the chapter, paragraph 33 of 35) is as follows: “the existence of the powerful, intelligent, beneficent, prescient, and provident Divinity, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social Contract and the Laws.” To these positive dogmas, Rousseau adds a negative one: intolerance. Rousseau calls the dogmas of the civil religion “sentiments of sociability, without which it is impossible to be either a good Citizen or a loyal subject.” To conclude this section, and the chapter as a whole (essentially the book itself), Rousseau observes, “Now that there no longer is and no longer can be an exclusive national Religion, one must tolerate all those which tolerate the others insofar as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of the Citizen. But whoever dares to say, *no Salvation outside the Church*, has to be driven from the State.”¹⁷

As I mentioned, Beiner and Rahe are not alone in questioning the logic and soundness of Rousseau's civil religion proposal. Gildin asks, "Are the tenets of the civil religion not exposed to the very same objections that Rousseau raised when discussing the religion of man? Is not the central tenet of the civil religion, as set forth by Rousseau, the afterlife? Does not the predominant concern with the afterlife lead to a depreciation of this life, and since political life is part of this life, to a depreciation of political society as well?"¹⁸ Certainly "the life to come" is problematic for Rousseau, yet he insists on it. Apparently, the risk of detachment from worldly concerns is not as great as the loss of divine punishment for worldly crimes. There is an important positive observation to make here—namely, the extensive *overlap* of the civil religion with Christian religious sects. What, in Rousseau's view, is the good that comes from this overlap? The overlap of the civil religion with Christianity will reduce the discord in the society over ultimate questions and reduce the power of the religious authorities—priests or ministers—to decide ultimate matters for the populace. Whatever overlaps with the civil religion will necessarily be diminished as a source of political strife.

III.

Rahe suggests Rousseau was not entirely serious in his praise of ancient virtue. He detects a distaste in Rousseau's account of "national religions and their warring gods" for the "martial orientation of the ancient republics and for the fanatical patriotism that animated them." In this Rousseau demonstrates "just how much he owes to Montesquieu." Rousseau's position is, at least in his practical advice to the Genevans, Corsicans, and Poles, a "halfway house of sorts: a polity neither fully martial nor bourgeois, whose members occupy a position intermediate between that held by citizens in classical antiquity and that of the very first men and who savor something approaching 'the sweetness of a social interchange free from dependence' that had, he claims, typified early human society prior to the invention of agriculture."¹⁹ Beiner frames his response to Rousseau in terms of the lure of Montesquieuan moderation that favors England over Sparta, modernity over antiquity, a choice he believes Rousseau, suffering from "profound ambivalence," cannot bring himself to make. "One may recall Montesquieu's tacit suggestion that ancient citizenship, as grand as it is, is fatally impugned by the

fact that republican virtue in its full rigor demands something equivalent to the fanaticism of self-abnegating monks (*Spirit of the Laws*, book 5, chapter 2).”²⁰ Beiner reads Montesquieu as siding with “small-souled modernity” against the ancients, whereas Rousseau’s sympathies are on “both sides while knowing they are contradictory.”²¹

Gildin provides a similar analysis of Rousseau’s thought. Gildin finds that, at the end of the chapter on civil religion, “the question still remains of whether something has not been irretrievably lost, according to Rousseau, in the transition from the period in which exclusive national religions were typical to the present period in which such religions are no longer possible. Even if the tolerant civil religion and the tolerant religions of the priest do lend support to political society, can they lend it anything like the support which exclusive national religions once did? The answer would have to be that they cannot.” Gildin shows that the contest between national religions and transnational or universalist religions (Christianity) is part of a larger contest between the ancient city and its way of life and the modern liberal state and its way of life. Gildin quotes from Rousseau’s first draft of the chapter on civil religion: “Now if pagan superstition, despite this mutual tolerance and in the midst of literature and a thousand virtues, engendered so many cruelties, I do not see how it is possible to separate those very cruelties from that very zeal, and reconcile the rights of a national religion with those of humanity; it is better, then, to bind the citizens to the State by weaker and gentler ties, and to have neither heroes nor fanatics.” Ancient republican virtue depended on slavery. “Ancient national religion as well as ancient slavery made possible a republican spirit far more powerful than any spirit one could hope to establish in their absence.” Because of this Gildin concludes that it would be wrong—and in any case impossible—to attempt to recover ancient virtue. It is “irretrievably lost to political life in modern times according to Rousseau.”²²

Gildin’s explanation is more satisfactory than Beiner’s fence-sitting description of Rousseau. Far from not being able to make up his mind, Rousseau was above all committed to human freedom. Rousseau was a critic of the Enlightenment, yet the small self-governing republic elaborated in the *Social Contract* did not mean a return to the inequalitarian (or aristocratic) view of human beings that characterized ancient political philosophy; quite the opposite: Rousseau saw that the maintenance of human freedom could be accomplished only within a radically equalitarian community.

IV.

The epigraph to Beiner's chapter on the *Social Contract* is from the Profession of Faith. It reads, "Bayle has proved very well that fanaticism is more pernicious than atheism, and this is incontestable. But what he did not take care to say, and which is no less true, is that fanaticism, although sanguinary and cruel, is nevertheless a grand and strong passion which elevates the heart of man, makes him despise death, and gives him a prodigious energy that need only be better directed to produce the most sublime virtues."²³ At the end of his discussion, Beiner asks, "Does Rousseau follow through on the brave-sounding challenge to Bayle quoted in the epigraph to this chapter? My conclusion is that he does not." As we have seen, Beiner views the "anemic" dogmas of Rousseau's "watered-down quasi-religion" as uninspiring and therefore utterly incapable of "fostering good citizenship and helping to consolidate the foundations of the state."²⁴ Without denying the weakness of deism, I want to underscore the far-reaching influence on our understanding of the positive benefits of religion to politics that Rousseau's reflections on civil religion have had.

The long footnote from the Profession of Faith that Beiner cites is significant in part for its greater frankness than the speech of the Vicar.²⁵ In order to begin to evaluate the footnote we must see the context into which it is inserted, and to do that we must back up in the text just a bit (two pages or six paragraphs). The Vicar is discussing the one negative dogma of the civil religion: intolerance. Speaking of his role as a priest to men, he says, "I shall not fail to make religion lovable to them; I shall not fail to strengthen their faith in the truly useful dogmas every man is obliged to believe. But God forbid that I ever preach the cruel dogma of intolerance to them, that I ever bring them to detest their neighbor to say to other men, 'you will be damned.'" To avoid religious intolerance and keep the social peace is a critical goal of the gentle Vicar: "I think to urge someone to leave the religion in which he was born is to urge him to do evil. . . . Let us respect the laws, not disturb the worship they prescribe; let us not lead the Citizens to disobedience." The telling remark is the following: "We do not know with certainty whether it is a good thing for them to abandon their opinion in exchange for others, and we are very certain that it is an evil thing to disobey the laws." Rousseau also speaks to the happiness of individuals (this aspect of the Profession of Faith goes beyond the *Social Contract* to address the

lives of people in morally unsound regimes, which for Rousseau would be most of humanity). “So long as there remains some sound belief among men, one must not disturb peaceful souls or alarm the faith of simple people with [theological] difficulties which they cannot resolve and which upset them without enlightening them.” Rousseau does not mean to substitute a civil religion for an existing Christian religion. He means, exactly as he said in the *Social Contract*, that all religions that can agree to the dogmas of the civil religion and agree to tolerate each other are acceptable. It is best, in fact, “due to the [theological] uncertainty in which we dwell” that we stay in the religion in which we were born. This is because “in every [good] sect the sum of the law is to love God above everything and one’s neighbor as oneself; that no religion is exempt from the duties of morality; that nothing is truly essential other than these duties.”²⁶ Rousseau’s blunt conclusion is that, at least for human beings generally, “without faith no true virtue exists.”²⁷

In contrast to the political and personal benefits of religion, the atheistic philosophy of the early Enlightenment sows “dispiriting doctrines in men’s hearts under the pretext of explaining nature.” Modern philosophy is dogmatic, haughty, and destructive. “By overturning, destroying, and trampling on all that men respect, they deprive the afflicted of the last consolation of their misery, and the powerful and the rich of the only brake on their passions.” And yet the philosophers “boast that they are the benefactors of mankind.” Rousseau agrees that “the truth is never harmful to men” and thus asserts that what the philosophers teach “is not the truth.”²⁸

Here Rousseau attaches his long footnote. Whereas the edifying body of the text has been put in mouth of a character, the Vicar, the footnote seems to be Rousseau speaking directly. If fanaticism, although sanguinary and cruel, “produces a grand and strong passion that elevates men,” “irreligion—and the reasoning and philosophic spirit in general—causes attachment to life, makes souls effeminate and degraded, concentrates all the passions in the baseness of private interest, in the abjectness of the human *I*, and thus quietly saps the true foundations of every society.”²⁹ What is Rousseau’s intention in opposing religious fanaticism to atheistic philosophy? Does it, as Beiner suggests, reveal a failure on Rousseau’s part to fulfill a challenge he lays down for himself in the *Social Contract*’s chapter on civil religion?

It is helpful to recall that Rousseau entered the Enlightenment debate on religion and politics after Baruch Spinoza and John Locke had done their monumental work to distill the Christian teaching. As Joseph Cropsey

explains, "Throughout the Enlightenment there runs the drive to reduce to a minimum the content of dogmas, for two apparent reasons: first, as Spinoza has it, to frustrate the theologians whose authority is in direct proportion to the multiplicity and obscurity of the tenets of faith that only they can interpret and wield; second, so that the law of works, of charity, of morality and, at bottom, of sociality may shine forth and take precedence of the law of faith."³⁰ These quintessentially liberal concerns are prominent in the *Social Contract* and the Profession of Faith.

Rousseau's proposal of minimal dogmas was not innovative, yet his intention was quite different from his immediate predecessors. Rousseau pulled back in his published writings from the atheism of Hobbes in an attempt to moderate the "anti-religious ire"³¹ that launched the early Enlightenment. He saw the utility, even the necessity, of religion to healthy politics, and he saw that for ordinary men to be happy in existing societies (that is, in unjust and corrupt ones) they needed to be able to believe in a caring God and in the immortality of human souls. In the Profession of Faith he supplied an education in "natural religion" designed to appeal chiefly to "the voice of conscience" rather than to reason alone or to divine revelation. In this beautifully crafted work, Rousseau appealed to the common sentiments of humanity—to the inner voice of conscience—to establish a middle ground between atheistic philosophy and religious fanaticism that would serve to support both public virtue and private happiness. He thus placed his powerful imaginative gift in the service of a rehabilitation of religion in the minds of his influential liberal readers, above all the French intellectual elites.

By Rousseau's time French and European elites no longer took seriously the doctrines of the Catholic Church and no longer believed that its authorities were in possession of the truth about the world. Christianity had been discredited and had come to be, as Tocqueville would explain, on the wrong side of history.³² Rousseau argues that the European world is in a period of moral decline chiefly due to the Enlightenment and its atheistic philosophy. Yet republican politics needs virtue, and the people will practice the social virtues only if they believe God wills that they do so. The people look to their rulers. And the rulers, the elites of any society, are also not philosophers, however much they may see themselves, as the French intellectual elites did, as skeptics of traditional moral teachings. Even more than the people, the elites, too, need to find some basis for the practice of the social virtues. The civil religion dogmas Rousseau proposes are dependent not on

revelation but on a view of the natural whole that is in principle available to all those whose hearts are open and whose conscience has not been stifled by self-interest.

Rousseau says that the dogmas of the civil religion “ought to be simple, few in number, stated with precision, without explanations or commentary.”³³ They contrast with the complicated interpretations of Scripture generated by religious authorities that must be endlessly discussed and applied to actual cases. But in being given to the people “without explanation,” they are intended to make sense to ordinary intellects and are not expected to become controversial. The dogmas are at the core of the great monotheistic religions and overlap with them. Tocqueville remarks in *Democracy in America* that the North American Indians, before they had any contact with Europeans, believed in an afterlife.³⁴ Rousseau was certainly counting on this common (in a sense, natural) human view of existence to render the civil religion useful yet inoffensive.

Rousseau clearly believed that his brief juridical advocacy of the dogmas of civil religion in the *Social Contract* was justified by the moral decline of Europe brought on by the atheistic philosophy of the early Enlightenment. Christianity in this period is the dominant “real” religion, but in addition to no longer being believed by intellectual elites, it is harmful in itself to politics and cannot serve as a civil religion, whether in its pure form or in its “religion of the priest” form. This is clearly a perilous situation for political life and especially for (future) republican regimes, which are more dependent on virtue and less dependent on honor, as Rousseau learned from Montesquieu. It is in this specific situation that the readily accepted dogmas of the civil religion offer a way of allowing a nation to keep the good and socially necessary teachings of religion while preventing the harm to society that comes from intolerant or cruel religions that seek to gain ascendancy over ordinary politics by declaring to the people, “Outside the Church, no salvation.”

v.

Beiner emphasizes Rousseau’s critical importance to the philosophical dialogue on civil religion while treating him as a second-rank thinker who could not get his story straight. Yet Beiner’s insistence that Rousseau failed to meet his own civil religion test misses the forest for the trees. The larger picture

is that Rousseau's carefully crafted and beautifully composed praise of religion had enormous influence on his contemporaries and later generations of liberal political thinkers that dramatically altered, from philosophers to statesmen, the modern understanding of religion and politics.³⁵ Tocqueville, Rousseau's greatest student, in particular stands out for taking the position that religion is absolutely necessary for democracy.³⁶ Religion does several important things for democracy: it declares that not everything the state might like to do is morally acceptable, it lifts the moral imaginations of citizens to the mysterious One in Heaven, drawing them away from the small-souled pettiness that constantly threatens democratic men and women, and it offers hope to the suffering, reward of the good, and punishment of the wicked in the life to come. And religion settles nagging doubts about the meaning of life by answering the ultimate questions in an authoritative way, and this conveniently frees democratic citizens to get on with their financial and family concerns. Tocqueville, however, does not reject the historical necessity of Christianity as the religion of the vast majority of Americans. Tocqueville saw that there had been two American foundings, an early Puritan founding of obligation to the revealed God and a second Lockean founding of natural rights.³⁷ For Tocqueville the Puritan founding was the more decisive and far-reaching. In John Koritansky's estimation, "Tocqueville's thought remains closer to the *Social Contract* than to [the more private faith of the Vicar in] *Emile*. He intends to show how society can be preserved against corruption. His openness to religion recommends a concession to established sects, along with the proviso . . . that they conform to the requirements of society."³⁸ Tocqueville found in Rousseau's chapter "On Civil Religion" inspiration for his own provocative reflections on religion in America, yet he did not feel obliged to follow Rousseau in denying the political utility of Christianity. If the political philosopher was not willing to concede anything to established sects, his student, the more practical political thinker, was. I believe this means that despite Rousseau's refusal to sanction Christianity as a civil religion, Rousseau nonetheless made it possible, via Tocqueville's application of Rousseau's thought to America, for others to see how a Christianity made tolerant and reasonable could serve as the civil religion of a modern commercial democracy. In Tocqueville we see the lasting positive legacy of Rousseau's analysis of civil religion in the *Social Contract*. In considering the relation of these two thinkers, the one uncompromising and rigorous, of the highest intellectual

and imaginative power, the other flexible and moderate, of morally sound and far-seeing judgment, we discover the issue of civil religion to be a place where philosophy does well to yield to the wisdom of political thought.

NOTES

1. Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 215. Beiner cites Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, ed. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
2. Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 215nn57–58.
3. Paul A. Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy's Drift* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 136.
4. Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 206.
5. Hilail Gildin, *Rousseau's Social Contract: The Design of the Argument* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 182.
6. Gildin, *Rousseau's Social Contract*, 180–81; see 180–90 for Gildin's analysis of the chapter, which I have followed.
7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 144.
8. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 146.
9. Gildin, *Rousseau's Social Contract*, 183.
10. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 146–47.
11. Gildin and Beiner agree on this point (and the earlier reference to Hobbes supports it). See Gildin, *Rousseau's Social Contract*, 183; Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 12–13.
12. Gildin, *Rousseau's Social Contract*, 185.
13. Gildin, 186.
14. Compare Aristotle's distinction between the good man and the good citizen in book 3 of the *Politics*. The good citizen is good relative to his regime, while the good man is not. See *Politics* 1276b16–1277b32.
15. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 149.
16. Rousseau, 149.
17. Rousseau, 149, 150, 151.
18. Gildin, *Rousseau's Social Contract*, 188.
19. Rahe, *Soft Despotism*, 136–37.
20. Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 16.
21. Beiner, 16.
22. Gildin, *Rousseau's Social Contract*, 189–90.
23. Beiner, *Civil Religion*, 11.
24. Beiner, 15–16.
25. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or On Education*, trans. and ed. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1979), 312–13. Citations of *Emile* refer to pages in the Bloom edition.
26. Of course, this is surprising from the perspective of the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, but it fits perfectly with the *Social Contract*, which attempts to remake men for political life by alienating them from nature, so that in fulfilling their duties they do not experience a contradiction between their duties and natural inclinations.
27. Rousseau, *Emile*, 309–12.
28. Rousseau, *Emile*, 312.
29. Rousseau, *Emile*, 312n.
30. Joseph Cropsey, "Religion, the Constitution, and the Enlightenment," in *On Humanity's Intensive Introspection* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2012), 83.
31. Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 44.
32. See Tocqueville's introduction to *Democracy in America*.
33. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 150.
34. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 25–26: "Like all other members of the great human family, these savages believed in the existence of a better world, and under different names they adored God, the creator of the universe. Their notions on great intellectual truths were generally simple and philosophical."
35. Consider this from George Washington: "Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of a peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W. B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988), 521.

36. One can see Rousseau's massive influence on Tocqueville even in the table of contents of *Democracy in America*—e.g., "Of Religion Considered as a Political Institution: How It Serves Powerfully the Maintenance of a Democratic Republic among the Americans," "Indirect Influence That Religious Beliefs Exert on Political Society in the United States."

37. See James Ceaser, "Alexis de Tocqueville and the Two-Founding Thesis," *Review of Politics* 73, no. 2 (2011): 219–43.

38. John C. Koritansky, *Alexis de Tocqueville and the New Science of Politics* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2010), 184.

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How the Founders Agreed About Religious Freedom but Disagreed About the Separation of Church and State

VINCENT PHILLIP MUÑOZ AND KEVIN VANCE

In the landmark “wall of separation” church-state case *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947),¹ the Supreme Court turned to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison to announce the meaning of the establishment clause. Ever since, scholars and judges have appealed to the American founders to interpret the First Amendment’s protection of religious freedom. A broadly shared methodological commitment to originalism in church-state matters, however, has not produced much agreement on the bench. An underappreciated reason why is that while the founders agreed about the existence and importance of a natural right to religious freedom, they disagreed over how to separate church from state.

The aim of this chapter is to explain the founders’ shared and competing understandings of religious freedom. The first section of this chapter explains the founders’ common understanding of the existence of a natural right to religious liberty. The second section considers the founders’ disagreement over how that right ought to limit the scope and exercise of governmental power. By better understanding how and why the founders agreed and disagreed about religious liberty, it is hoped that Americans today might more accurately and thoughtfully deliberate how best to protect our “first freedom.”

THE FOUNDERS' AGREEMENT: THE NATURAL RIGHT TO RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM

The Founding Fathers' commitment to religious liberty is reflected most clearly in their public documents, and there is perhaps no better place to begin than those drafted by the "father of our country," George Washington. After he was elected America's first president, Washington received numerous congratulatory letters from the country's religious associations. His responses, which he knew would be circulated, offered the new nation a civics lesson on the principles of religious liberty. To the Quakers, whose pacifist beliefs frequently put them at odds with military leadership during the Revolutionary War, Washington explained, "The liberty enjoyed by the People of these States, of worshipping Almighty God agreeable to their Consciences, is not only among the choicest of their *Blessings*, but also of their *Rights*."²

The following year, in 1790, he famously wrote to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."³

Washington's identification of religious liberty as a natural right reflected the Founding Fathers' common understanding.⁴ The eleven original states that immediately drafted new constitutions (Rhode Island and Connecticut did not) all acknowledged the fundamental character of religious freedom in their declarations of rights or constitutions.⁵ Delaware (1776), Pennsylvania (1776), North Carolina (1776), and New Hampshire (1784) explicitly used the language of natural rights. Article II of Delaware's 1776 Declaration of Rights, for example, stated "that all men have a natural and unalienable right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own consciences and understandings."⁶ The notion of a *natural* right conveyed the founders' understanding that religious freedom was not a creation of or concession by the state. Individuals possessed the right of religious freedom by virtue of their human nature and, to use the terminology of social compact theory, "in the state of nature"—that is, before and outside the existence of government.

According to the Declaration of Independence, governments are instituted among men to secure certain rights. But the founders also held that not every right is best secured by granting authority over it to the state. Religious liberty was of this sort.⁷ James Madison, perhaps most famously, explained the “unalienable” character of religious liberty in Article 1 of his 1785 *Memorial and Remonstrance*,⁸ and the same argument can be found among founders across the political spectrum. In a 1787 essay, the Anti-Federalist “Brutus,” for example, declared, “But it is not necessary . . . that individuals should relinquish all their natural rights. Some are of such a nature that they cannot be surrendered. Of this kind are the rights of conscience, the right of enjoying and defending life, etc.”⁹

Article IV of the 1784 New Hampshire Declaration of Rights acknowledged the same understanding: “Among the natural rights, some are in their very nature unalienable, because no equivalent can be given or received for them. Of this kind are the RIGHTS OF CONSCIENCE.”¹⁰ Not only was religious freedom not created by the state, but the founders believed it was not surrendered to the state upon the formation of the social compact.

To account for the origins of the natural right to religious liberty, founding-era writers primarily employed two types of arguments: Lockean-inspired epistemological claims and theological doctrines about the nature of authentic religious exercise. Both lines of argument can be found in the writings of the founding era’s leading statesmen and in the sermons of religious preachers who were influential at the time.

Madison and Jefferson, to start with the former group, employed the twin epistemological arguments of John Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*: that the mind cannot be coerced but necessarily follows the evidence it finds persuasive. Locke had claimed, “It is only Light and Evidence that can work a change in Men[']s Opinions; which Light can in no manner proceed from corporal Sufferings, or any other outward Penalties.”¹¹ Following Locke, Jefferson’s resounding opening to his original 1777 draft of his Bill Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia proclaimed, “Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint.”¹² Madison also emphasized the nature of the mind’s operations. In his *Memorial and Remonstrance*, he contended that religious freedom is an “unalienable” right “because the

opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds cannot follow the dictates of other men.”¹³ The imperviousness of belief to force, Jefferson and Madison concluded, makes legal coercion of religious opinions irrational.

Coercion of religious opinion, according to the Virginia Statute, is also “a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion.” Jefferson does not cite the Bible, but his argument for religious freedom includes the theological assertions that “Almighty God hath created the mind free,” civil authorities act on an “impious assumption” when they assume dominion over the faith of others, and it is “sinful” as well as tyrannical to compel individuals to contribute financially to the propagation of opinions that they disbelieve.¹⁴ Madison’s *Memorial and Remonstrance*, similarly, begins with the recognition of the “fundamental and undeniable” theological truth “that religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence.” From this particular understanding of religion, he reasons to the conclusion that men have a natural right to religious liberty.¹⁵ Because “it is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to him,” individuals have the right to worship freely. The “unalienable” natural right to religious freedom, Madison teaches, follows from our more fundamental duties to the creator.¹⁶

As noted above, theological arguments defending the right of religious freedom were also made by preachers who were influential during the founding era. The American tradition of theological defenses of religious freedom extends back at least as far as Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island.¹⁷ In the mid-eighteenth century, that tradition was prominently continued by Elisha Williams, a Congregational theologian and rector of Yale College. Elisha Williams derived religious freedom from the voluntary nature of authentic religious practice. It is a “self-evident maxim,” he wrote, “*that a Christian is to receive his Christianity from CHRIST alone*”—and not, he made clear a few lines before, from “the pope, by a council, by a convocation or a parliament, from writings of fathers, or any doctors of learning and reputation.”¹⁸ Christ was found in the Bible through a direct personal encounter with the Scriptures. “The sacred scriptures are the alone rule of faith and practice to a Christian,” Williams preached, and therefore “*every Christian has a right of judging for himself what he is to believe and practice in religion according to that rule.*”¹⁹ At the heart of Williams’s political theology was

this “right of private judgment,” which, in the same sermon, he explained as follows:

Every man has an equal right to follow the dictates of his own conscience in the affairs of religion. Every one is under an indispensable obligation to search the scripture for himself (which contains the whole of it) and to make the best use of it he can for his own information in the will of GOD, the nature and duties of Christianity. And as every Christian is so bound; so he has an unalienable right to judge of the sense and meaning of it, and to follow his judgment wherever it leads him; even an equal right with any rulers be they civil or ecclesiastical.²⁰

Williams seamlessly wove his scriptural defense of private judgment with Lockean social compact theory. When entering into a civil state, he explained, individuals alienate the executive power possessed in the state of nature to protect life and property, but not their sovereignty over religious beliefs. Anticipating Madison, he held that “the members of a civil state *do retain their natural liberty or right of judging for themselves in matters of religion.*”²¹

Just before the American Revolution, the central themes of Williams’s argument were restated by the New England Baptist leader Isaac Backus in a number of influential pamphlets, including *A Seasonable Plea for Liberty of Conscience*, which took its title from Williams’s work, and his 1773 *Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*.²² Backus’s combination of social contract theory and dissenting Protestant theology can be clearly seen in the first two articles he proposed in 1779 for the Massachusetts State Declaration of Rights:

1. All men are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights, among which are the enjoying and defending life and liberty, acquiring, possessing, and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.
2. As God is the only worthy object of all religious worship, and nothing can be true religion but a voluntary obedience unto his revealed will, of which each rational soul has an equal right to judge for itself, every person has an unalienable right to act in all religious affairs

according to the full persuasion of his own mind, where others are not injured thereby. And civil rulers are so far from having any right to empower any person or persons, to judge for others in such affairs, and to enforce their judgments with the sword, that their power ought to be exerted to protect all persons and societies, within their jurisdiction from being injured or interrupted in the free enjoyment of this right, under any pretense whatsoever.²³

Inspired by a blend of Lockean philosophy and Protestant theology, the philosophical statesmen and political preachers of the founding generation agreed that individuals had a natural right to religious freedom that a just government was required to respect.

The recognition of a natural right to religious freedom was made in founding-era state constitutions, the level of government at which most church-state matters were then addressed. This shared understanding, however, went only so far. As we shall address in the next section, with the exception of what we might call the core right of religious worship, founding-era states and statesmen disagreed over the degree to which state constitutional protections for religious freedom required the separation of church and state.

THE FOUNDERS' DISAGREEMENT: HOW TO SEPARATE CHURCH FROM STATE IN ORDER TO PROTECT RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

A review of the founding-era state constitutions suggests that the core of the founders' understanding of the natural right to religious liberty included the right to worship. Of the eleven original states that rewrote their constitutions during the founding era, nine included specific textual recognition of the right to "worship" in their declarations of rights or state constitutions. The Delaware, Pennsylvania, and Vermont declarations of rights, for example, stated that no authority could or ought to be vested in or assumed by any power "that shall in any case interfere with, or in any manner controul, the right of conscience in the free exercise of religious worship."²⁴ Virginia and Georgia, the two states that did not use the word "worship" in their newly written fundamental laws, recognized that all persons shall be entitled to the "free exercise of religion."²⁵ For the founders, the natural right to religious liberty most clearly entailed limitations on state regulations or prohibitions on worship as such.

What other constitutional protections religious liberty might require, however, was a matter of dispute. Positions ranged from Madison's revolutionary libertarianism to the more traditional cooperative relationship John Adams labeled a "most mild and equitable establishment."²⁶ Perhaps the deepest areas of disagreement concerned taxpayer funding of religion. Led by Madison and Jefferson, Virginia banned special taxes to fund religious ministers. Madison argued the "unalienable" natural right of religious liberty required religion to remain "wholly exempt" from the state's cognizance, and, therefore, specific taxes to fund clergymen were an improper exercise of state power.²⁷ Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which was adopted in 1786, stated that "no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever."²⁸

Not only did taxpayer funding of religion violate the principle of religious liberty, Jefferson and Madison argued, it was bad for religion. According to the Virginia Statute, such support tends "to corrupt the principles of that *very* religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing, with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it."²⁹ Madison, similarly, argued in his *Memorial and Remonstrance* that "ecclesiastical establishments, instead of maintaining the purity and efficacy of Religion, have had a contrary operation. During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution."³⁰ In contemporary political parlance, Jefferson's and Madison's opposition to state support of religion was grounded in classical liberal political philosophy and libertarian skepticism of the benefits of governmental assistance to those who receive it.

Not all of Virginia's leading statesmen agreed. Jefferson's statute was adopted only after the narrow defeat of Patrick Henry's bill "Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion." Henry's legislation proposed to use tax dollars to support religious clergy because "the general diffusion of Christian knowledge hath a natural tendency to correct the morals of men, restrain their vices, and preserve the peace of society."³¹ It was initially supported by no less a figure than George Washington, who, in the midst of the legislative struggle, wrote to George Mason, "Altho [*sic*], no man's sentiments are more opposed to *any kind* of restraint upon religious principles than mine are; yet I must confess, that I am not amongst

the number of those who are so much alarmed at the thoughts of making people pay towards the support of that which they profess, if of the denomination of Christians; or declare themselves Jews, Mahomitans or otherwise, and thereby obtain proper relief.”³² A decade later, in his Farewell Address, Washington would famously articulate the underlying political rationale that animated Henry’s bill and other governmental attempts to nurture and endorse religious belief among the American people:

Of all the dispositions and habits that lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Man and citizens. . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.³³

Because they viewed religion an “indispensible” support for republican citizenship, traditional conservatives thought it necessary and proper for government to support religion.

That view was adopted by Congress when it renewed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, the third article of which declared, “Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”³⁴ Note that the bill assumed that government-sponsored schools would teach religion and morality. It was also adopted in several New England states, most notably Massachusetts. Article III of the 1780 Massachusetts Declaration of Rights declared, “The happiness of a people and the good order and preservation of civil government essentially depend upon piety, religion, and morality.” Because these traits “cannot be generally diffused through a community but by the institution of the public worship of God and of public instructions in piety, religion, and morality,” the same article authorized *and required* the state legislature to make sure local town governments made suitable provisions “for the institution of the public worship of God and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion, and morality in all cases where such

provision shall not be made voluntarily.”³⁵ In Massachusetts, government funding of religion (or at least Protestantism) was understood to support the common good by making men moral and, hence, good citizens. Such funding was also understood to be compatible with a proper understanding of the rights of conscience. According to Theophilus Parsons, chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, those who objected to taxpayer funding of religion on grounds of religious freedom “mistake a man’s conscience for his money.”³⁶

The founders disagreed on other church-state policies as well. During the debates over ratification of the federal Constitution, numerous Anti-Federalists criticized the absence of religious tests for federal office. During the Massachusetts ratifying convention, Colonel Jones, to take one Anti-Federalist example, argued that “rulers ought to believe in God or Christ, and that, however a test may be prostituted in England . . . if our public men were to be of those who had a good standing in the church, it would be happy for the United States, and [a person can] not be a good man without being a good Christian.”³⁷ Federalists countered that the principle of religious liberty demanded religious nondiscrimination in eligibility requirements for public office. James Iredell articulated the Federalist response in a particularly forceful manner during the North Carolina ratifying convention:

Every person in the least conversant in the history of mankind, knows what dreadful mischiefs have been committed by religious persecutions. Under the color of religious tests, the utmost cruelties have been exercised. . . . America has set an example to mankind to think more modestly and reasonably—that a man may be of different religious sentiments from our own, without being a bad member of society. . . . I consider the clause under consideration [Article VI’s ban on religious tests for federal office] as one of the strongest proofs that could be adduced, that it was the intention of those who formed this system to establish a general religious liberty in America.³⁸

Iredell continued, “But it is objected that the people of America may, perhaps, choose representatives who have no religion at all, and that pagans and Mahometans may be admitted into offices. But how is it possible to exclude any set of men, without taking away that principle of religious freedom which we ourselves so warmly contend for?”³⁹ Federalists won the day, and Article VI’s ban on religious tests for office remained in the Constitution. The vast

majority of founding-era state constitutions, nonetheless, still continued to impose religious limitations on office holding.⁴⁰

Another area of disagreement pertained to explicit constitutional recognition of the right to conscientious exemption to military service. A proposal to add such protection to the federal Bill of Rights was defeated in the First Congress.⁴¹ Only four of the original state declarations of rights and constitutions included language similar to the following from Pennsylvania: "Nor can any man who is conscientiously scrupulous of bearing arms, be justly compelled thereto, if he will pay such equivalent."⁴²

As long as the founders continue to play a prominent role in First Amendment religious freedom jurisprudence, the promise that we might simply turn to them to resolve our current church-state disputes will remain unfulfilled. While the founders can help us better understand the philosophical and theological arguments for the existence of the natural right to religious liberty, their own disagreements about the proper separation of church from state suggest that they are perhaps a better starting place than ending point as we continue the American constitutional project of securing the blessings of liberty.

NOTES

1. *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947).

2. George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington: Presidential Series*, vol. 4, *September 1789–January 1790*, ed. Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 266.

3. George Washington, *The Papers of George Washington: Presidential Series*, vol. 6, *July–November 1790*, ed. Mark A. Mastromarino (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 285.

4. For extended discussions about the founders' natural rights political philosophy, see Michael P. Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic: Studies in the Foundation of the American Political Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); alongside Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1988); and Philip A. Hamburger, "Natural Rights, Natural Law, and American Constitutions," *Yale Law Journal* 102 (1993): 907–60. Compare to Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); and Pocock, "Between Gog and Magog: The Republican Thesis and the *Ideologia Americana*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987): 325–46. Zuckert and Pangle criticize Wood and Pocock for elevating the importance of classical republican theory in the American founding at the expense of Lockean natural rights political philosophy.

5. Rhode Island's Royal Charter of 1663 protected religious liberty, though it did not use the language of natural rights.

6. Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner, eds., *The Founders' Constitution* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001).

7. In this light, consider Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James H. Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 47, in which he contends that men enter into society in order to "contribute to the Comfort and Happiness of this Life; leaving in the mean while to every Man the care of his own Eternal Happiness. Zuckert, in *Launching Liberalism: On Lockean Political Philosophy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 305, argues that Locke departs from Hobbes, who thought that "the good of each can be accomplished only through the in principle complete substitution of public will for the private wills of citizens" in the areas of property rights and religion.

8. James Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments (1785)," in *Religious Liberty and the American Supreme Court: The Essential Cases and Documents* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 582.

9. Brutus [pseud.], "Essay II," in *The Complete Anti-Federalist*, ed. Herbert J. Storing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 2:373. See also the Memorial of the Presbyterians of Virginia to the General Assembly (August 13, 1785), which petitioned, "Religion is altogether personal, and the right of exercising it unalienable; and it is not, cannot, and ought not to be, resigned to the will of the society at large; and much less to the legislature, which derives its authority wholly from the consent of the people, and is limited by the original intention of civil associations" (Memorial of the Presbyterians, 1911, 113–14). For discussions of this point and other citations, see Hamburger, "Natural Rights," 919n38. See also Vincent Phillip Muñoz, *God and the Founders: Madison, Washington, and Jefferson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11–48, section entitled "James Madison's Principle of State Noncognizance of Religion"; in addition to Michael W. McConnell, "The Origins and Historical Understanding of Free Exercise of Religion," *Harvard Law Review* (1990): 1455–58; and Jess Sikkenga, "Government Has No Religious Agency: James Madison's Fundamental Principle of Religious Liberty," *American Journal of Political Science* 56 (2012): 745–56.

10. Benjamin Perley Poore, ed., *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters, and Other Organic Laws of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1878), 1280–81.

11. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James H. Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 27.

12. Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia," in *Religious Liberty and the American Supreme Court: The Essential Cases and Documents*, ed. Vincent Phillip Muñoz (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1983), 580. For a consideration of Jefferson's indebtedness to Locke's argument for religious freedom, see Sanford Kessler, "Locke's Influence on Jefferson's 'Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom,'" *Journal of Church and State* 25 (1983): 231–52; and McConnell, "Origins of Free Exercise of Religion." For accounts of the adoption of the Virginia Statute, see Thomas E. Buckley, SJ, *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776–1787* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977); and John Ragosta, *Religious Freedom: Jefferson's Legacy, America's Creed* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

13. Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance," 582–83.

14. Jefferson, "Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," 580.

15. For a discussion of the theological tenets embedded in the *Memorial and Remonstrance*, see Muñoz, *God and the Founders*, 29–32. Muñoz contends that Madison's argument assumes, among other things, that an individual could not achieve salvation with acts apart from faith. See Gary Rosen, *American Compact: James Madison and the Problem of Founding* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 18–26, in which Rosen also argues for a theological basis to parts of Madison's argument, claiming that the document has an "obvious Protestant subtext" that is occupied "almost exclusively with the subjective state of the believer" (23). Thomas Lindsay, in "James Madison on Religion and Politics: Rhetoric and Reality," *American Political Science Review* 85 (1991): 1321–37, defends a different view in maintaining that "Madison's project for religious liberty is theoretically grounded in the denial of human capacity to

know the nature of existence of the commands of—and thus the duties toward—revelation's God (1326). See Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison and the Founding of the Federal Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 436n68; and Garrett Ward Sheldon, "Religion and the Presidency of James Madison," in *Religion and the American Presidency*, ed. Gastón Espinosa (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 122–27; both go so far as to claim specifically Christian theological influences on Madison's thought, while Muñoz holds open the possibility that Madison may have believed his argument was grounded on natural theology alone.

16. Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance," 582.

17. See Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, ed. Samuel L. Caldwell, 7 vols. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963); Williams forcefully denounces religious coercion in "Bloody Tenant of Persecution" and "Bloody Tenant Yet More Bloody." For more on Williams's political and theological thought and his influence on religious liberty in the United States, see James E. Ernst, *The Political Thought of Roger Williams* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1966); and Timothy L. Hall, *Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). Hall contends that Williams "did not advocate religious liberty out of a personal lack of faith but out of an exuberance of it" (10). For a brief discussion of Puritan and Evangelical views of religious liberty in colonial America, see John Witte Jr. and Joel A. Nichols, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2011), 22–29.

18. Elisha Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants: A Seasonable Plea for the Liberty of Conscience," in *Political Sermons of the Founding Era, 1730–1805*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 1:64.

19. Williams, "Essential Rights and Liberties," 55.

20. Williams, 61. Of course, not all Protestant theologians agreed that the "right of private judgment" was theologically sound. For a discussion of the eighteenth-century theological debate among Protestants on the matter, see

Nicholas P. Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of Church and State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 91–95; Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 31–40; Thomas J. Curry, *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 93–95.

21. Williams, "Essential Rights and Liberties," 61.

22. Isaac Backus, *A Seasonable Plea for Liberty of Conscience, Against Some Late Oppressive Proceedings; Particularly in the Town of Berwick, in the County of York, in Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (Boston: Originally printed for and sold by Philp Freeman; published online by Gale); Backus, "An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty," in *Political Sermons of the Founding Era, 1730–1805*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 1:327–68. For a discussion of Williams's and Backus's views on religious liberty, see Miller, *Religious Roots of the First Amendment*, 91–113.

23. Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *A Documentary History of Religion in America to the Civil War* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 268.

24. Poore, *Federal and State Constitutions*, 278, 1541, 1859.

25. Poore, 383, 1909. Rhode Island and Connecticut did not rewrite their constitutions during the founding era. While it did not recognize a right to worship as such, Rhode Island's 1663 charter expressly recognized that not all colonists could, "in their private opinions, conforme to the publique exercise of religion, according to the lutturgy, formes and ceremonies of the Church of England." The charter then declared

that noe person within the sayd colonye, at any tyme hereafter, shall bee any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any differences in opinione in matters of religion, and doe not actually disturb the civill peace of our sayd colony; but that all and everye person and persons may, from tyme to tyme, and at all tymes hereafter, freelye and fullye have and enjoye his and their owne judgments

and consciences, in matters of religious concernments, throughout the tract of lande hereafter mentioned; they behaving themselves peaceable and quietlie, and not using this libertie to lycentiousnesse and profanenesse, nor to the civill injurie or outward disturbance of others; any lawe, statute, or clause, therein containd, or to bee containd, usage or custome of this realme, to the contrary hereof, in any wise, notwithstanding. (Poore 1596–97)

When Connecticut did adopt a new constitution in 1818, it declared that “the exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination, shall forever be free to all persons in this State” (Poore, 258).

26. The phrase is found in Adams’s diary as published in John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850), 2:399. For a discussion of Adams’s church-state thought, see John Witte Jr., “A Most Mild and Equitable Establishment’: John Adams and the Massachusetts Experiment,” *Journal of Church and State* 41 (1999): 213–52.

27. Madison, “Memorial and Remonstrance,” 582–83.

28. Jefferson, “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom,” 581.

29. Jefferson, 581.

30. Madison, “Memorial and Remonstrance,” 584. See James Madison, *The Writings of James Madison*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1910), 102–3, in which Madison reflects on his efforts on behalf of religious freedom later in his life, writing, “We are teaching the world the great truth that Govts do better without Kings & Nobles than with them. The merit will be doubled by the other lesson that Religion flourishes in greater purity, without than with the aid of Govt.” See also Madison’s letter to Edward Everett, March 19, 1823, in Madison, *Writings of James Madison*, 124–30.

31. Buckley, *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia*, 188.

32. George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 28:285 (Washington’s emphasis). The text of Henry’s bill is published in Buckley,

Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 188–89. For more on Washington’s views on religious liberty, see Vincent Phillip Muñoz, “George Washington on Religious Liberty,” *Review of Politics* 65 (2003): 11–34. Muñoz emphasizes Washington’s use of the concept of public goods to unify Washington’s position on the limits of free exercise and government support for religion. See John G. West, “George Washington and the Religious Impulse,” in *Patriot Sage: George Washington and the American Political Tradition*, ed. Gary L. Gregg II and Matthew Spalding (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1999), 267–86, in which West argues that Washington’s views have contemporary purchase, and he sees in Washington’s position on religious exemptions for Quakers a precursor to the compelling state interest test. See Daniel L. Dreisbach and Jeffrey H. Morrison, “Religion and the Presidency of George Washington,” in *Religion and the American Presidency*, 47–75; and Tara Ross and Joseph C. Smith Jr., *Under God: George Washington and the Question of Church and State* (Dallas: Spence, 2008), who both contend that Washington’s actions, speeches, and writings on religious liberty and the separation of church and state should be considered alongside Jefferson’s more well-known views. For an earlier treatment, see Paul F. Boller, *George Washington and Religion* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), in which Boller suggests that Washington’s support for religious liberty was grounded more in Washington’s desire for political peace than in a natural rights philosophy.

33. Washington, *Writings of George Washington*, 35:229.

34. “Northwest Ordinance,” in *The Founders’ Constitution*, ed. Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1:28.

35. Poore, *Federal and State Constitutions*, 957.

36. *Thomas Barnes v. The Inhabitants of the First Parish in Falmouth*, 6 Mass. 401, 408 (1810). In addition to sanctioning state funding of religion, the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights also declared that “no subject shall be hurt, molested, or restrained, in his person, liberty, or estate, for worshipping God in the manner and season most agreeable to

the dictates of his own conscience, or for his religious profession or sentiments, provided he doth not disturb the public peace or obstruct others in their religious worship.”

37. Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in Several State Conventions, on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1859), 2:119.

38. Elliot, *Debates in Several State Conventions*, 4:192–93.

39. Elliot, 4:194. For a discussion of the history of the adoption of the Article VI ban on religious tests, see Daniel L. Dreisbach, “The Constitution’s Forgotten Religious Clause: Reflections on the Article VI Religious Test Ban,” *Journal of Church and State* 38 (1996): 261–95. Dreisbach maintains that the religious test ban is not evidence of a national program of secularization but of national deference “to the states on matters regarding religion” (294).

40. Vincent Phillip Muñoz, “The Original Meaning of the Establishment Clause and the Impossibility of Its Incorporation,” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law* 8 (2006): 612–14n154.

41. Virginia, North Carolina, and Rhode Island proposed amendments to the First

Congress that would have exempted conscientious objectors from military service. While the House of Representatives approved a moderate exemption clause that left Congress with the authority to demand a tax or substitute in exchange for the exemption of the conscientious objector, no exemption clause was approved by the Senate. For a discussion of the debate in the First Congress on exemptions for conscientious objectors, see Muñoz, *God and the Founders*, 109–19; and Ellis M. West, “The Right to Religion-Based Exemptions in Early America: The Case of Conscientious Objectors to Conscription,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 10 (1994): 395–400.

42. Poore, *Federal and State Constitutions*, 1541. The states were Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York (for Quakers only), and New Hampshire. Vermont’s 1777 Declaration of Rights also included similar language. For a discussion of religious exemptions at the state level, see Muñoz, *God and the Founders*, 118–19; and McConnell, “Origins and Historical Understanding of Free Exercise of Religion,” 1466–73.

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Tocqueville on Religion and Democratic Character

Equality, Mediocrity, and Greatness

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Recent scholarship has illuminated the way that the political project of the Enlightenment was part and parcel of an accompanying theological project. As early modern philosophers sought to lay the moral foundations for liberal democratic politics, they sought to transform Christianity so as to neutralize it as a source of opposition and, in some cases, to garner its support.¹ This essay examines Alexis de Tocqueville's critical reflections on that project of religious transformation, as well as his attempt to contribute to it by moderating it and correcting what he saw as its crucial deficiencies. Tocqueville says that upon visiting America it was the religious aspect of the country that first struck his eye,² and his account of life in that country reveals the ways in which Christianity there had been shaped, altered, and—in crucial respects—weakened by democracy. In the United States, after all, democracy is “the generative fact from which each particular fact” issues (*Democracy*, 3). As our social state, it is the “first cause” of most of our “laws, customs, and ideas”; whatever “it does not produce, it modifies” (45).

But although Tocqueville often presents himself as a sociologist—deriving political phenomena from various subpolitical demographic and economic causes—he shows quite clearly that he understands democracy as imbued with the characteristics that the political science of the

Enlightenment sought to promote.³ Although the Americans do not study philosophy and hardly know the names of philosophical schools, they nonetheless possess a certain “philosophic method” that Tocqueville associates with Cartesian rationalism (*Democracy*, 403). Skeptical, pragmatic, empiricist, and individualistic, the Americans believe that “everything in the world is explicable” and so have “little faith in the extraordinary and an almost invincible distaste for the supernatural” (404). This gives their religion—like everything else in their society—a decidedly this-worldly, materialist, and utilitarian character. Indeed, as also appears, it is the rationalism of the Americans, thus understood, that renders them utterly uninterested in philosophy itself.

Modern democracy, which has reached its “extreme limits” in the United States (*Democracy*, 3, 12), is a historically unprecedented phenomenon because it owes its foundations to philosophy and to the popularization of a philosophical outlook. As Tocqueville presents them, Americans are largely alienated from traditional religion and biblical piety. While they read the Bible on Sundays as part of a helpful diversion from their commercial pursuits (517), they believe themselves to be liberated, rational, and progressive beings who are working toward the achievement of human perfectibility in this life (see 426–28). Indeed, it is this sentiment that gives shape to the aspirations and the poetry of democratic peoples in an age when “faith in positive religions is often faltering” (461). The “enlightened” moral horizon of the Americans thus essentially inverts the traditional or Christian outlook that was characteristic of aristocratic centuries and that the Enlightenment sought to overthrow. Whereas the “official doctrine” of those times held “that it is glorious to forget oneself and that it is fitting to do good without self-interest like God himself” (500), in democracy everything is thought of and justified in terms of the rational self-interest of the individual. The Enlightenment famously sought so bring the sun into the cave—to dispel the superstition and prejudice it believed had characterized all traditional societies and to replace these with more rational, humane, and universalistic foundations. But if Tocqueville’s account is to be believed, the result of this has been the creation of a new and potentially more troublesome superstition: the belief that, as members of a scientific society, we are liberated from all superstitions.⁴

The Americans, as Tocqueville describes them, are largely alienated from the biblical beliefs and sentiments that the early modern philosophers had

sought to dampen: they rarely speak of obligation or self-sacrifice, and they seem to have little in the way of devotion to anything greater than themselves. According to Tocqueville, this apparent liberation of self-interest has raised the specter of a new set of dangers unappreciated by the Enlightenment. The widespread belief among Americans that they are free from all dogmas has rendered them potentially vulnerable to new and dangerous ones,⁵ and it has done this, as I will detail below, by alienating them from certain natural human concerns—concerns that they continue to experience yet hardly have the vocabulary to describe. Most prominent among these is the desire for a kind of happiness that calls for self-sacrifice, or for an eternal and perfect existence that can be attained only by transcending—out of devotion to something greater than oneself—happiness in the most immediate or ordinary sense. In both volumes of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville attributes to human beings a natural longing for immortality that is bound up with this kind of desire for self-sacrifice (283–84, 510), and he describes how democracy’s emphasis on rational utility or material well-being has essentially left human beings rudderless, without the tools to understand their own deepest desires.⁶

At the same time, however, Tocqueville regards democracy, in spite of its tendency to hide these experiences from us, as fundamentally just. After all, it has made life materially better for the vast majority of the human species in a way that aristocracy, in spite of or rather because of its preoccupation with more transcendent forms of human greatness, never could. Tocqueville’s “new political science” therefore faces a complex challenge (*Democracy*, 7). On the one hand, how can he craft a civil religion for a people that has been decisively shaped by modern rationalism, and among whom religion is consequently on the decline? And on the other, in recovering a sense of what the Enlightenment rebelled against, how can Tocqueville preserve and protect those core aspects of liberal and democratic politics that he regards as fundamentally just and integral to human flourishing—aspects whose absence from the biblical tradition in fact helped motivate the Enlightenment’s hostility to it? In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that Tocqueville’s attempt to balance or reconcile these twin concerns forms the centerpiece of his political science. Thus, understanding this attempt helps us appreciate not only his relationship to prior thinkers but also, as we will see, his complicated view of democracy’s justice.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN RELIGION

The massive surface impression left by any initial reading of *Democracy in America* is that Tocqueville's Americans are an extraordinarily religious people. Tocqueville relates that this was the first thing that struck him upon his arrival on our shores, and his account of our politics communicates this powerful and unexpected realization. Unlike Tocqueville's European contemporaries, who under the sway of Enlightenment rationalism and materialism are inclined "to believe with Spinoza in the eternity of the world and to assert with Cabanis that the brain secretes thought" (*Democracy*, 281), the Americans display a widespread and—so it first seems—deeply felt religious faith: the United States is "still the place in the world where the Christian religion has most preserved genuine powers over souls" (278). And Tocqueville reports that he himself was initially puzzled by this spectacle of "one of the freest and most enlightened peoples" eagerly fulfilling "all the external duties of religion" (282). In France, after all, the Revolution was directed as much against the church as against the monarchy, and in a political world shaped by Enlightenment thought (and opposition to it), religion and democracy lived in an atmosphere of mutual antagonism. "The philosophers of the eighteenth century" had predicted that religious zeal would be "extinguished as freedom and enlightenment increase[d]," but Tocqueville's initial impression is that the American example shows that "the facts do not accord with this theory" (282). In the United States, the "great democratic revolution" that is changing Europe has reached its "extreme limits" (3), but its example apparently indicates that the European antagonism between religion and freedom is purely accidental. In fact, he says, America proves that the two are actually natural and even necessary allies (282, 419). The power of Christianity in America acts as a salutary guardian against demagoguery because it places certain political opinions beyond the pale of acceptable public discussion (279). "Up to now," Tocqueville says, no one in America has dared advance the "impious maxim" that everything is permitted in society's interest (280).

Tocqueville therefore suggests that religion is "the first" of America's political institutions (*Democracy*, 280) not in spite of but because of its legal separation from politics. Because Christianity in the United States is untainted by worldly ambitions, it has been able to come into its own and

rule over souls in the way proper to it. To the European reader of *Democracy in America*, that country presents a “great social enigma” (37) because it successfully combines the spirits of religion and of freedom, which at least the most radical of the Enlightenment philosophers had taken to be mutually contradictory.⁷ The Americans, he says, not only believe that Christianity and democratic freedom are compatible, but they completely confuse them in their minds: “It is almost impossible to have them conceive of the one without the other” (280–81). And, seeming to endorse this common American opinion, Tocqueville himself suggests that American democracy owes its founding—or rather its “point of departure”—not to the Enlightenment-inspired founders of the eighteenth century but to the New England Puritans of the seventeenth. He says it was these self-styled “pilgrims” (32), “pious adventurers” (32), and “sectarians” (35) who believed themselves chosen by God to found a new Israel (even to the extent that they literally copied their laws from the Pentateuch) (38) who are responsible for what became the American character: “I see the whole destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who landed on its shores, like the whole human race in the first man” (267).

But a simple comparison of Tocqueville’s account of the Puritans to that of the Americans of his time is sufficient to show how exaggerated this claim actually is. Although they were enacted by popular consent, the Puritan laws Tocqueville discusses (decreeing death for blasphemy, adultery, and religious dissent, and penetrating into almost every detail of private life) are invasive and shockingly illiberal—Tocqueville in his own name calls them “bizarre or tyrannical” (*Democracy*, 37–39). Whereas the Puritans took these laws from sacred texts because they believed those texts to contain revealed truths, the Cartesian Americans of the nineteenth century, as we have already seen, display a distaste for things supernatural (404). Religion in Tocqueville’s America “reigns . . . much less as revealed doctrine than as common opinion” (409). The Puritans undertook the extraordinarily dangerous task of founding a new colony in the American wilderness because they believed themselves called by a particular providence and because they were devoted to a good that transcended this life.⁸ Tocqueville’s Americans, by contrast, view religion as something desirable in large part because of its earthly utility (280–81)—in preserving republican institutions and in protecting a social order in which property rights are respected and commerce and industry flourish (273). Thus when listening to the American clergy, Tocqueville

says, "It is often difficult to know . . . if the principal object of religion is to procure eternal felicity in the other world or well-being in this one" (506).⁹

So although the Americans have rejected the antireligious sentiments of the *radical* Enlightenment, their attachment to Christianity has much to do with their belief in its utility and necessity as a civil religion.¹⁰ In this they are indeed creatures of the Enlightenment, but of the moderate Enlightenment only; it is not Spinoza or Voltaire but Locke who helps explain American piety. Like Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*, the Americans endorse separation of church and state on theological grounds, and their clergy teach that sincerely held religious errors are not blamable in God's eyes (*Democracy*, 283). But also like Locke, Americans effectively refuse toleration to atheists—excluding their testimony in court, for example—though on the *secular* ground that without belief the promises underlying the social contract will unravel (280n3; cf. 245). If Tocqueville's account is to be trusted, George Washington spoke for many Americans when he asked, "Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice?"¹¹ And in a more general and less tangible sense, the Americans believe that the maintenance of republicanism requires a public morality grounded in religion—or at least, as Washington's utilitarian warning concludes, "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."¹²

Tocqueville observes that the Americans of the nineteenth century have recognized this and so have adopted famously severe sexual mores (*Democracy*, 278). "Public opinion in the United States only gently represses love of wealth, which serves the industrial greatness and the prosperity of the nation; and it particularly condemns the bad morals that distract the human mind from the search for well-being and trouble the internal order of the family, so necessary to success in business" (595). But, Tocqueville says, it is American women in particular who discern and enforce this. Religion "cannot moderate" the ardor of American men for material enrichment, "but it reigns sovereign over the soul of woman, and it is woman who makes mores" (279). Thus in Tocqueville's picture, the piety of American wives and mothers makes the home a serene refuge from the tumult of commerce and industry, a counterweight to the reign of self-interest and materialism. But female piety as Tocqueville describes it is also rooted in the recognition of the essential need for this counterweight—and hence it, too, draws

its strength mainly from utilitarian and commercial considerations. Recognizing that prosperity requires stable families rooted in puritan mores, nineteenth-century American women willingly adopt traditional gender roles for reasons of “political economy.”¹³ Prosperity, so the thought goes, requires habits of self-restraint and self-denial, of regularity and order, that ultimately rest on noneconomic foundations—and so American women ensure strong families, lasting marriages, and the piety American men require to moderate their cupidity (at least in the short term).

From today’s perspective, of course, perhaps no feature of Tocqueville’s America seems more outdated than his discussion of women’s roles, and his account provides strong indications that the situation he describes likely would not and could not last. After all, in a society whose first moral principle is equality, and in which the love of well-being is “the national and dominant taste” (*Democracy*, 507), it could be predicted that women would eventually demand greater sexual freedom and the right to participate in the nation’s economic life. And these demands become even more compelling if one questions the presupposition that economic ends alone really do necessitate the kind of puritan moral foundations Tocqueville describes. To draw on our own experience, since the 1960s the United States has experienced a dramatic secularization of its public life, and while the social and political effects of this continue to be fiercely debated, an economic downturn has clearly not been among them.

Considering religion from a strictly utilitarian standpoint, Tocqueville’s Americans have achieved a remarkable degree of religious toleration. Religious bigotry, at least, is almost unknown in his United States (*Democracy*, 267, 278), in part because Christianity itself has been transformed along “democratic and republican” lines: “All the clergy there hold to the same language; opinions are in accord with the laws, and there reigns so to speak only a single current in the human mind” (277). Of course, this uniformity of thinking also has its dark side, as Tocqueville’s famous discussion of majority tyranny reveals (245). And, as it would seem, one of Tocqueville’s chief worries is that the uniform way that Americans think about religion will ultimately undermine religion itself. The nineteenth century, he writes, is a century of doubt, in which the energy of Christianity’s youth has dissipated because belief has been undermined by “negative” doctrines—that is, the skeptical and debunking accounts of the Enlightenment (286, 288). Such accounts may still praise the civic utility of religion, and they may

consequently lead even unbelievers to judge religion “useful,” but the “public opinion in favor of religion” they produce nonetheless hides the wounds piety has received at “the bottom of souls” (287). In praising Christianity for its political effects, the Americans have in fact decisively weakened its potentially most solid foundation: the conviction in the minds of believers that it is not merely useful but true. Writing from New York to his cousin Louis de Kergorlay, Tocqueville observed—much more frankly than in *Democracy in America*—that though religion in America was “a very strong impulse . . . in days gone by,” it is now “expiring day by day.” “Faith is evidently inert; enter the churches (I mean the Protestant ones) and you hear them speak of morality, of dogma not a word, nothing that could in any way shock a neighbor, nothing that could reveal the hint of dissidence. The human spirit loves to plunge itself into abstractions of dogma, discussions which are especially appropriate to a religious doctrine, whenever a belief has seized it strongly; the Americans themselves were formerly like that. This so-called tolerance . . . in my opinion, is nothing but a huge indifference.”¹⁴

American piety, externally so strong, thus appears to have a hollow core—one that perhaps helps to explain why it did ultimately unravel in the succeeding century and a half. But, as we will now see, Tocqueville was quite concerned about the dangers of that potential unraveling, as well as about the way that the spiritual shallowness of the Americans served to alienate them from what he regarded as certain core human experiences and concerns.

SELF-SACRIFICE AND THE RELIGIOUS INSTINCT

In both volumes of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville describes what he regards as a natural religious instinct. And, oddly enough, he claims to discover that instinct by observing the behavior of a people that is largely alienated from traditional religiosity, and whose foremost concerns lead it to a preoccupation with the goods of this life. In the midst of his discussion of the American fascination with material well-being, Tocqueville pauses to comment on what he calls our religious “follies”: bizarre outbreaks of fierce otherworldly spiritualism that erupt from time to time among a seemingly odd minority. He describes how whole families of Americans will suddenly uproot themselves and abandon the prosperity of the East to participate in religious revivals occurring on the frontier. For “several days and nights”

they forget “the care of their affairs and even the most pressing needs of the body” (*Democracy*, 510). Calvin Coolidge may have been right that the business of America is business, but religious awakenings and even strange cults are no less a part of our national life. According to Tocqueville, the reason for this is easily explainable. Man has “the taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal. These sublime instincts are not born of a caprice of his will: they have their immovable foundations in his nature; they exist despite his efforts. He can hinder and deform them, but not destroy them.” And when these instincts are imprisoned within this-worldly and materialist bonds, they can be counted on to burst forth violently, in a kind of equal and opposite reaction. “One should therefore not be astonished if, in the heart of a society that thought only of the earth, one encountered a few individuals who wished to regard only Heaven. I would be surprised if mysticism did not soon make progress in a people uniquely preoccupied with its own well-being” (510–11).

Tocqueville’s fullest description of this natural religious instinct occurs in volume 1, precisely after he has criticized “the philosophers of the eighteenth century” for predicting that religion would weaken as freedom and enlightenment increased (*Democracy*, 282). This sentiment, which could just as easily be attributed to the Enlightenment philosophers of the seventeenth century (283–84), was based on the proposition that religion could be understood as a psychological reaction to fear, ignorance, and material desperation. Hence, it was supposed, the spread of enlightenment and prosperity should cause religion to wane—and Tocqueville’s analysis (to say nothing of our experience today) provides ample evidence that this strategy was at least partly successful. But Tocqueville nonetheless asserts that the Enlightenment misunderstood something critical about human nature; it left certain key longings unaddressed, and these have persisted within a society without a place for them. Here is how Tocqueville describes them:

The short space of sixty years will never confine the whole imagination of man; the incomplete joys of this world will never suffice for his heart. Alone among all the beings, man shows a natural disgust for existence and an immense desire to exist; he scorns life and fears nothingness. These different instincts constantly drive his soul toward contemplation of another world, and it is religion that guides it there. Religion is therefore only a particular form of hope, and it

is as natural to the human heart as hope itself. Only by a kind of aberration of the intellect and with the aid of a sort of moral violence exercised on their own nature do men stray from religious beliefs; an invincible inclination leads them back to them. Disbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent state of humanity. (283–84)

As Tocqueville articulates our psychology, we human beings are driven by two deeply felt and potentially conflicting desires. On the one hand, we naturally fear death and desire to live forever. But on the other, the idea that life could exist merely for its own sake fills us with disgust. We want to live *for* something, and that sentiment, in turn, causes us to desire to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of some grander goal. Living well, as we conceive of it, always paradoxically entails the prospect of dying (*Democracy*, 504). Thus when this desire for self-sacrifice is combined with its seeming opposite—the fear of death—the result is a distinctly human and natural form of *hope*—a hope that our sacrifices will be rewarded, not in a merely mercenary way but in such a way that reward and sacrifice will somehow be bound up together in an eternal and perfect existence.¹⁵ For most people most of the time, that hope is naturally directed toward the belief in divinity. But when it is unnaturally cut off, as in America, the resulting psychological anomalies can be explained as arising from the “moral violence” that is done to human nature by a society that directs every desire toward the temporal and the mundane.

Tocqueville’s account of life in the United States is replete with descriptions of the unanticipated psychological effects that such a society has produced. Most famously and memorably, he describes the way the Americans remain inescapably anxious or restive in the midst of their prosperity. Those flocking to religious awakenings on the frontier constitute only a minority; Americans more typically fixate on the goods of this world, and they turn to their pursuit in an absurd effort to achieve something more permanent and lasting. Hence, they display a “feverish ardor” in their quest for wealth, and they are “constantly tormented” by a fear not just of poverty but of not having chosen the shortest route to riches (*Democracy*, 511). “The inhabitant of the United States attaches himself to the goods of this world as if he were assured of not dying, and he rushes so precipitately to grasp those that pass within his reach that one would say he fears at each instant he will cease to live before he has enjoyed them” (512). Here, it seems, is a

strange mirror-image of the religious psychology of fear and hope described in volume 1:

He who has confined his heart solely to the search for the goods of this world is always in a hurry, for he has only a limited time to find them, take hold of them, and enjoy them. His remembrance of the brevity of life constantly spurs him. In addition to the goods that he possesses, at each instant he imagines a thousand others that death will prevent him from enjoying if he does not hasten. This thought fills him with troubles, fears, and regrets, and keeps his soul in a sort of unceasing trepidation that brings him to change his designs and his place at every moment. (512)

The Americans as Tocqueville describes them are deeply troubled—it might be better to say they are gnawed at the bottom of their souls—by what is at once the most natural characteristic feature of the human condition and something that their commercial society does everything to hide from them.

But although Tocqueville's Americans at some points appear to be in denial about death, at other times they go so far as to seek it out. Indeed, as a kind of counterpoint to this restive pursuit of the goods of the body, Tocqueville also describes a few Americans who—like those who have given up the comforts of life to participate in religious awakenings—display an unexpected penchant for risk-taking and even self-sacrifice. At the end of volume 1, for example, he describes what he calls (with some irony) the commercial “heroism” of the American businessman (*Democracy*, 387). Just as the French revolutionary armies were willing to endure extraordinary sacrifices of blood and treasure to remake the world, the Americans display an extraordinary fortitude and an odd kind of asceticism in their attempts to open up new trade routes and transform the frontier: “What the French did for victory, they do for low cost” (386). Whereas the European navigator will venture onto the seas “only with prudence,” his American counterpart “departs while the tempest still roars; at night as in day he opens all his sails to the wind; while on the go, he repairs his ship, worn down by the storm, and when he finally approaches the end of his course, he continues to fly toward the shore as if he already perceived the port” (386). In the two-year round-trip journey between Boston and China, he will endure hardship and sacrifice—putting into port no longer than necessary, drinking brackish water, eating only salted meat—and all to sell his pound of tea for a penny

less than his English competitor (386–87). “The American is often shipwrecked; but there is no navigator who crosses the seas as rapidly” (386).

“For an American,” Tocqueville writes, “one’s entire life is spent as a game of chance, a time of revolution, a day of battle” (*Democracy*, 388). But of course, there is no small disconnect between the ends the American businessman seeks and the means he employs to attain them. Since that merchant sailor cannot take his wealth with him if he goes down with his ship, and since he hardly seems interested in enjoying his money in the first place, it is reasonable to ask whether what really drives him is an attraction to risk-taking or self-sacrifice—even or especially if such sacrifices seem to be thoroughly out of place in a commercial society. Here is how Tocqueville describes the sentiments of those American pioneers who are driven, ostensibly by love of wealth, to conquer nature and to settle the frontier: “It would be difficult to depict the avidity with which the American throws himself on the immense prey that fortune offers him. To pursue it he braves without fear the arrow of the Indian and the maladies of the wilderness; the silence of the woods has nothing to astonish him, the approach of ferocious beasts does not move him: a passion stronger than love of life spurs him constantly” (270). But of course, as Tocqueville observes in the same context, “the wildernesses are filling up” (298), so we are compelled to wonder what outlet such self-sacrificial passions will have within an established and settled commercial society—such as our own—that seemingly directs every passion toward material comfort and enrichment.

HONOR, JUSTICE, AND GREATNESS

Tocqueville’s most succinct and thematic analysis of the moral dimension of this problem occurs in his chapter “On Honor in the United States and in Democratic Societies” (589). He begins this chapter with the following observation:

It seems that men make use of two very distinct methods in the public judgment that they bring to the actions of those like them: sometimes they judge them according to the simple notions of the just and the unjust that are widespread over all the earth; sometimes they appraise them with the aid of very particular notions that belong only to one country and one period. Often it happens that these two

rules differ; sometimes they combat each other; but they are never entirely confused with each other, nor do they ever destroy each other. (*Democracy*, 589)

Human beings as Tocqueville describes them are both natural and conventional beings, and our consciousness of belonging simultaneously to the human race and to a particular association within it—to a nation, a caste, a class, and so on—endows us with two rival and often conflicting moral sentiments that Tocqueville names justice and honor. Whereas the “holy law” of justice has its genesis in the “permanent and general needs” of the entire human race, the demands of honor are rooted in the particular requirements of particular associations—and these will often contradict the dictates of justice, especially when a given association (like the feudal aristocracy of the Middle Ages) needs to maintain its position by exploiting or dominating a larger majority of human beings (*Democracy*, 589). Whereas justice seeks to foster the most basic, bodily requirements that all human beings share in common—for example, the “general and permanent interest of the human race is that men not kill one another” (590), hence the universal belief in the injustice of homicide—the demands of honor are often bizarre, violent, and self-sacrificial. Feudal honor (“the most extraordinary species of honor that has ever appeared in the world” [590]) “imperiously commanded men to overcome themselves, it ordered the forgetting of oneself” (591).

A class that has come to put itself at the head and above all the others, and that makes constant efforts to maintain itself in this superior rank, must particularly honor the virtues that have greatness and luster and that can be readily combined with pride and love of power. It is not afraid to disturb the natural order of conscience so as to place those virtues before all others. One even conceives that it willingly elevates certain audacious and brilliant vices above peaceful and modest virtues. It is in a way constrained by its condition to do so. (591)

As Tocqueville concludes, “Feudal Aristocracy was born of war and for war.” Thus nothing “was more necessary to it than military courage,” and it glorified this virtue “even at the expense of reason and humanity” (591).

In so positively describing a morality rooted in hierarchy and domination, Tocqueville might appear here to be on the cusp of a kind Nietzscheanism.

He speaks frankly of the “greatness” of such cruel and inhuman “virtues,” and he even conveys a sense of their *impressiveness*, in spite or even because of their violence and injustice. At one point he calls them “the turbulent virtues that often dazzle, but still more often bring trouble in society” (*Democracy*, 594). But Tocqueville here differs from Nietzsche in at least two respects. Firstly, Tocqueville consistently maintains that these “virtues” are indeed unjust: again, their primacy disturbs the “natural order of conscience” (591), and this gives them a deeply problematic or confused character. Hence, in the quotation provided above, he also calls them vices. “Reason and humanity” thus remain fixed moral standards for Tocqueville, and, in his telling, aristocrats and other conquerors and descendants of conquerors always felt themselves, however dimly, to be violating a more general, more ancient, “and more holy law” (589). They were not and could not be beyond good and evil. Secondly, for Tocqueville, the genesis of honor is to be found not in human creativity but in a necessity rooted in material self-interest. To repeat, he says it was “necessary” for the feudal aristocracy to exalt military courage; it was “constrained by its condition to do so,” and the laws of honor that it created were therefore “always confined within certain *necessary* limits” (591; emphasis added).

In one sense, then, Tocqueville’s account of honor is very much a debunking one. By uncovering honor’s origins in “a few fixed and invariable needs” faced by every ruling class (*Democracy*, 591), he at first appears to reduce honor to a set of easily understood sociological principles. But Tocqueville’s account soon reveals itself as still more complicated than that, for it also attempts to do justice to the attraction to self-sacrifice that forms honor’s heart. Just as Tocqueville’s account of the wrongs entailed in honor is quite distant from Nietzsche, his acknowledgment of the naturalness and impressiveness of the desire for self-transcendence is equally distant from Hobbes, whose idea of *justice* is almost identical to the one Tocqueville describes here, but whose description of *honor* is much more straightforwardly debunking.¹⁶ Because the feudal aristocracy needed to maintain its social position, Tocqueville says, it prized personal loyalty above all else: “To remain faithful to one’s lord, to sacrifice oneself for him in case of need, to aid him in undertakings whatever they were, such were the first prescriptions of feudal honor” (592). But when feudal honor thus “imperiously commanded men to overcome themselves” or to forget themselves (591), it also told them that such actions were *good*—for the group, of course, but also for the

individual making such sacrifices. For only in acting in this way could one “win honor” (589n1; emphasis original), which aristocrats saw as the only good worth pursuing; they regarded material goods with contempt and the desire for them as “servile cupidity” (594). Among aristocrats, then, honor is “easily mixed and confused . . . with the idea of all that distinguishes them.” In hierarchical societies, “nobles” are distinguished from commoners in their capacity to make sacrifices but also in the greatness they can achieve in so doing—hence the term’s ambiguous or double meaning. Honor appears to them “as the distinctive feature of their physiognomy; they apply its different rules with all the ardor of *personal interest* and, if I can express myself so, they put passion into obeying it” (597; emphasis added).

To the neutral observer, the demands of honor appear “incoherent and bizarre” (*Democracy*, 591), and this may be because they combine the hope for self-interest and the desire for self-sacrifice into a single grand and irreducible desire. Because this desire *is* single and irreducible, it would seem impossible for human beings to pursue either of honor’s self-interested or self-sacrificial elements in isolation. In the same way, in Tocqueville’s analysis it is equally impossible to devote oneself entirely to justice as it is to do so entirely to honor, as can be seen from the example of the Americans themselves. For just as aristocrats knew that the requirements of honor compelled them to violate a more general and “holy law,” so too, Tocqueville says, the Americans feel that something is lacking in their exclusive pursuit of justice understood as a kind of collective selfishness. According to Tocqueville, as human beings become more equal, as castes and classes dissolve into the consciousness of a common humanity, the demands of honor become fewer, weaker, and more obscure. Little by little, they begin to approach “the moral laws adopted by common humanity” (596). American notions of honor still encourage a kind of self-sacrifice, but only a less demanding and less intense version of it. As a particular association devoted to increasing commercial prosperity, the Americans salute risk-taking—but only in business. Not conquest but the hostile takeover is the aggression to be permitted; not death but bankruptcy is the sacrifice to be accepted (594).

Thus as ranks become mixed and human beings become “alike and equal,” “their interests and their needs” become “intermingled” (*Democracy*, 599). Honor fades into the background and is gradually replaced by justice or “simple virtue” (598). Actions are evaluated according to a natural rather than a “conventional value”; “the general needs of humanity that

conscience reveals to each” become “the common measure” of morality (599). It might therefore be expected that as American society becomes more democratic than it was in the 1830s, even its commercial version of honor might eventually decline, to be replaced with a simple Hobbesian morality of passivity or “niceness.” Tocqueville’s prediction at the end of the work, after all, is that the natural endpoint of the development of democratic societies is likely to be found not in the rough-and-tumble of capitalism but in the peaceful economic government of the administrative state (663). But be that as it may, Tocqueville’s suggestion in the present context is that as honor declines, morality becomes exclusively focused on what all human beings most clearly have in common—that is, the body (588). Our moral and political debates today, of course, tend to focus almost exclusively on how best to promote health and well-being. Points of honor, or the demands of the soul or the human spirit, are likely to be seen as anachronisms—quaint at best, holdovers from a “blind and barbaric” past at worst (594).

But, as we have already seen, Tocqueville’s account also shows the ways Americans are fundamentally unsatisfied with their exclusive focus on the material and the physical. He has indicated that that focus does “a sort of moral violence” to human nature (*Democracy*, 284) because it seeks to deny the self-sacrificial side of our desires and aspirations. Although the Americans in his description at first seem irritatingly proud of their prosperity and their freedom, Tocqueville claims to discern a hidden neediness at the bottom of their national vanity. He says there is something “restive” and “jealous” about it. It displays a deep-seated consciousness of *inferiority*, as Tocqueville discerns from the way the Americans seem to regard their particularly petty ambitions—all of which, to repeat, begin and end in the desire for well-being (587–88). As he writes, although democratic man proudly refuses to admit the superiority of his neighbor, he “nonetheless despises himself to the point that he believes himself made only to taste vulgar pleasures” (604).

THE JUSTICE OF DEMOCRACY

To address this problem, Tocqueville proposes a project of political and religious statesmanship that can guard against the shrinking of the democratic soul by re-instilling these self-sacrificial longings to the extent possible. At the conclusion of his chapter on the petty ambitions of democratic citizens,

he calls for legislators to “give them difficult and perilous affairs . . . in order to elevate ambition and to open a theater for it” (*Democracy*, 604). Grand national projects, extending even perhaps to war (620–21), might be the most obvious way to recover a sentiment of devotion in a postreligious age (89). With the benefit of hindsight, of course, such a recommendation might seem unpalatable to us to say the least. And Tocqueville also recognized that, at least on a day-to-day basis, his political science would have to look for other avenues. After all, as his chapter on honor makes clear, democrats tend to have commercial and pacific passions rather than military ones (617). Accordingly, he puts most of his stock in encouraging small acts of devotion—to associations and local government, for example—as well as in “finding the spot” (423) where dedication to the common good might appear, however remotely or indirectly, to bring some benefit to the individual (500–503). Most importantly, Tocqueville seeks to encourage religion—or, at the very least, to arrest its decline—in the hope or expectation that it can reinstill some sentiment of dedication to something beyond oneself, together with some hope for an existence transcending this one (see, e.g., 504–6, 519–20). In this, of course, Tocqueville shows himself willing to make an almost shocking number of compromises, but he does so on the grounds that any religion that refused to compromise with materialism and modernity would risk reducing itself to “a flock of impassioned zealots in the midst of an incredulous multitude” (422).

Moreover, in at least one decisive respect, such accommodations with modernity, commercialism, and materialism are not entirely compromises, at least in the sense in which partisans of aristocracy and traditional religion would have used that term. Such partisans would likely have seen these measures as unprincipled acts of surrender—abandonments of virtue and the good life—or, at best, as *necessary* if unpalatable sacrifices (*Democracy*, 13). But that is not entirely Tocqueville’s perspective. As we have seen, he goes so far as give the name “justice” to a very basic and low-aiming morality whose end is comfort and security. At the very end of the work, Tocqueville presents himself as struggling to overcome his own aristocratic sensibilities, and he writes that although democracy does not share the same virtues as aristocracy, it does have others. In particular, although democracy “is perhaps less elevated” than aristocracy, “it is more just, and its justice makes for its greatness and its beauty” (675). Tocqueville’s indication here, I believe, is that the democratic commitment to human equality can itself become an

object of dedication or self-overcoming greatness—and that object can, in turn, become an integral part of a democratic civil religion (345). One need think here of just a few of the most important examples of liberal democratic rhetoric—the Declaration of Independence, for example, or the speeches of Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King Jr.—to consider manifestations of this possibility.

Now, from Tocqueville's perspective, this kind of devotion surely entails certain paradoxes, for its success would, in one sense, entail the triumph of a regime that threatens to render sacrifices and devotion unnecessary. But of course, no society, however liberal or democratic, can entirely do away with the need for these things (*Democracy*, 617), and, in his chapter on ambitions, Tocqueville bestows some of his highest praise on those revolutionaries who fought for the establishment of democracy itself (600). He says that in democratic revolutions, the spirit of aristocracy "drifts over the mass," and in joining the effort to overthrow aristocracy some previously undistinguished people can attain the "long-envied greatness" previously denied to them by an unjust class-distinction (600). Indeed, in the very context in which he cautions against the triumph of both scientific and commercial materialism, Tocqueville also indicates that he has a great deal of sympathy for the Enlightenment project. "If I had been born in an aristocratic century," he writes, "I would wish it possible for me to stimulate the sentiment of [material] needs . . . ; I would think of discovering the most rapid and easiest means of satisfying the new desires that I had made to arise, and, turning the greatest efforts of the human mind toward physical studies, I would try to excite it with the search for well-being" (518). Had Tocqueville lived in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, he suggests, he would have written a very different book, perhaps one much more in the spirit of Descartes's *Discourse on Method* or Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* than *Democracy in America*.

But in the nineteenth century, legislators have other concerns. In the wake of democracy's triumph, man's natural trajectory is toward ever more materialism, even to the extent that "he will finally lose the use of his most sublime faculties" and "degrade himself." "The peril is there, not elsewhere" (*Democracy*, 519). Leave democrats alone, and they will build a prosperous society; there is little danger of their reintroducing the injustice of aristocracy (383; but cf. 530–32). Because the moral teachings of the Enlightenment have penetrated to the bottom of our souls, the "art of the legislator" (518) in a

democratic age must be employed to counterbalance their natural tendencies (and in particular by preserving religion, aristocracy's "most precious inheritance" [519]).

Tocqueville, in other words, seeks to correct what he sees as the oversights of the Enlightenment in part because he shares a deep sympathy with its goals. To illustrate this, I will end this essay with a brief mention of the character in his work who receives the highest praise: Pascal. In Tocqueville's description, Blaise Pascal was one of those rare and extraordinary geniuses whose soul was animated by a "sublime and almost divine love of truth" and a "pure desire to know" (*Democracy*, 436). Just as the desire for honor led aristocrats to acts of self-sacrificial devotion, and just as the religious instinct engenders a passion for self-forgetting in ordinary believers, so, too, did Pascal's "ardent, proud, and disinterested love of the true" (435) cause him to sacrifice absolutely everything. Marshaling "all the powers of his intellect in order to better discover the most hidden secrets of the Creator," Pascal tore his soul away from his body and died "of old age before forty" (435–36). In Tocqueville's paradoxical description, Pascal was a religious philosopher who was unwilling to admit the need to sacrifice his intellect—though one who in the end did just that. His passion for truth refused to accept that truth is beyond human comprehension—though his death could be taken as testimony to the error of that belief. Located in Tocqueville's chapter on the attitude of democracies toward the sciences, Tocqueville's portrait of Pascal is meant to help serve as an antidote to the natural democratic distaste for any purely theoretical knowledge. In a way that the Enlightenment philosophers would likely have found agreeable, our social state inclines us to pursue the practical and technological sides of the sciences almost exclusively, but (as Tocqueville warns, in a message well crafted to democratic tastes) that may be a potentially self-undermining enterprise, for it is often the theoretical discoveries that nourish practical ones (438–39). Thus Tocqueville offers a correction and a criticism of the Enlightenment, but he does so on grounds that he appears to share in common with it: a praise of humanism or the human spirit, and a belief in the nobility of the attempt to understand the world by human reason.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Aaron L. Herold, "The Chief Characteristical Mark of the True Church": John Locke's Theology of Toleration and His Case for Civil Religion," *Review of*

Politics 76, no. 2 (2014): 195–221; J. Judd Owen, *Making Religion Safe for Democracy: Transformation from Hobbes to Tocqueville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Thomas L. Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's "Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Martin D. Yaffe, "Interpretive Essay," in *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. Martin D. Yaffe (Newburyport, Mass.: Focus Philosophical Library, 2004), 267–347.

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 282. Subsequent citations of *Democracy* refer to pages in this edition and translation.

3. In an 1852 speech to the French Academy, Tocqueville proposes a top-down approach for understanding social transformation, and—in contrast to the introduction to *Democracy in America* (see 3–6)—he attributes the French Revolution primarily to the "political science" of the Enlightenment; Alexis de Tocqueville, "Speech Given to the Annual Public Meeting of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences on April 3, 1852," in *Alexis de Tocqueville and the Art of Democratic Statesmanship*, ed. Brian Danoff and L. Joseph Hebert Jr. (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011), 20. See also Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, ed. François Furet and François Mélonio, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 195–202.

4. In this, I believe Tocqueville observed in America something similar to what Leo Strauss called the "second, 'unnatural' cave" or the "deep pit beneath the cave"; Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions of the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 136n2; Strauss, "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 155.

5. According to Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 407–9, since complete intellectual liberation is impossible, the widespread belief in such liberation is only likely to result in the subordination of the intellect to an authority masquerading as the embodiment of reason:

the majority. In addition to the obvious political danger, this also engenders a profound threat to the possibility of genuine freedom of thought on the part of a few.

6. I have discussed this problem in greater detail in Aaron L. Herold, "Tocqueville on Religion, the Enlightenment, and the Democratic Soul," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 3 (2015): 523–34. See also Sarah Beth V. Kitch, "The Immovable Foundations of the Infinite and Immortal: Tocqueville's Philosophical Anthropology," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 4 (2016): 947–57; and Jean M. Yarbrough, "Tocqueville on the Needs of the Soul," *Perspectives on Political Science* 47, no. 3 (2018): 123–41.

7. Here in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville singles out Spinoza—both by name in volume 1 (281), and in his critical chapter on pantheism in volume 2 (425–26).

8. See Tocqueville's quotations from Nathaniel Morton, in *Democracy in America*, 34–35.

9. For more detailed analyses to which this account is indebted, see Owen, *Making Religion Safe for Democracy*, chap. 4; and Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), chap. 8.

10. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 280: "It is also from this point of view that the inhabitants of the United States themselves consider religious beliefs. I do not know if all Americans have faith in their religion—for who can read to the bottom of hearts?—but I am sure they believe it necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion does not belong only to one class of citizens or to one party, but to the entire nation; one finds it in all ranks."

11. George Washington, *Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 971.

12. Washington, *Writings*, 971.

13. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 574: "Americans have applied to the two sexes the great principle of political economy that dominates industry in our day. They have carefully divided the functions of man and woman in order that the great social work be better done."

14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans.

James Toupin and Robert Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 48.

15. See Plato, *Republic* 331a.

16. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 10.

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